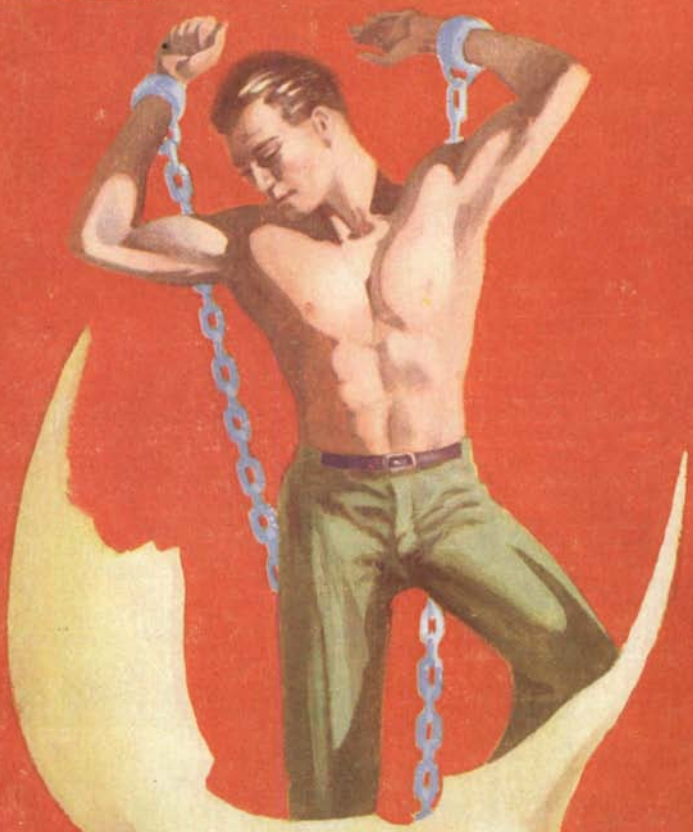
NEW WORLDS SCIENCE FICTION

No. 30 1/6



PRISONER IN THE SKULL

by CHARLES DYE

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NEW WORLDS

PROFILES

John Newman

An industrial research chemist, age 27, height 6 feet 1½ inches, unmarried, John Newman has been a steady contributor to New Worlds since 1952, his scientific articles ranging from silicones to stars.

He first became interested in science fiction during World War II but it was not until he was contacted by the Cosmos Club, the war-time Teddington group, that he learnt of the existence of fandom. For some years he was librarian of the Cosmos Library and helped with the production of Cosmic Cuts, their fan magazine. He was one of the originators of the White Horse Thursday evening gatherings and he organised the first two post-war conventions in this country.

As he explained "I wanted to attend a science fiction convention, having heard of the American ones, but it was obvious that the only way to get one was to tell the London Circle that they were going to have a convention and then organise it myself. Luckily there was plenty of help from the older fans and the conventions did not collapse from sheer inertia, as was half expected." He also contributed news articles to a number of American fan magazines.

He was born in Shepherds Bush, lives in Hounslow, works in Fulham and studies in Chelsea. Attempts were made to educate him until he was sixteen, when he left school and continued his education and studies in his spare time. His present work is a magnetochemical study of the physical structure of solid solution catalysts. He has spent the last three years dodging in and out of three of the main London hospitals and hopes that he has seen the last of them.

His hobbies include lazing, reading, woodwork, gardening and cooking, the latter inspired by Jack Chandler's culinary talents. His ambitions are simple—health and wealth.

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NEW WORLDS SCIENCE FICTION

VOLUME 10

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Cover painting symbolising " Prisoner in The Skull "

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Nova Novels . . .

For some months now our inside back cover has carried an advance announcement of the new series of Nova Novels we have been preparing and many enquiries have been received both from readers and through the normal trade channels as to when the first two titles would be available. I am therefore more than pleased to announce that they will both be on sale in Great Britain within two weeks of the publication date of this issue of *New Worlds* and be available from all regular retailers where this magazine is obtained. Overseas readers may find a more lengthy delay owing to transportation.

The series would have started two months ago but I was not satisfied with the original cover designs—as these designs are our shop window to the normal bookstall browser, it was of primary importance that we had something eye-catching, attractive, yet at the same time specifically different to most contemporary publications as to be readily recognisable as a "Nova Novel" once they began appearing regularly. I think we now have that design and as the series continues so readers will see an extension of some of the ideas incorporated on the first two books.

The first two titles—*The Weapon Shops Of Isher* by A. E. van Vogt, and *The City In The Sea* by Wilson Tucker (author of our recent successful serial *Wild Talent*)—are admirable titles with which to start the series. Both books in their original case-bound editions have had considerable publicity and not a little praise from reviewers, both are by extremely popular writers, and Wilson Tucker's novel will see its first publication throughout the British Commonwealth and Empire (excepting Canada), which it justly deserves. I feel that, after *Wild Talent*, it is his next best novel, although *The Long Loud Silence* was extremely popular.

Nova Novels are of high quality production. We think they will be a credit to our name and do much towards furthering the advancement of science fiction *and* fantasy as an accepted literature. I would like to say in passing that when designing the covers I had in mind the fact that so many people are forced to hide their science fiction literature under plain covers because of the lurid scenes depicted on the front, others only read it in the seclusion of their homes, while countless thousands shudder away at the sight of some of the impossibilities portrayed. None of those things will be necessary with the new series—people will be able to read them everywhere without fear of a 'suspecting eye.'

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The second two titles will be released eight weeks later. They are Theodore Sturgeon's *The Dreaming Jewels* and James Blish's *Jack Of Eagles*. Both are extremely powerful novels although directly opposed in plot content and I am of the opinion that the former is a *better novel throughout* than the author's 1954 International Fantasy Award title *More Than Human*. It is certainly a book that can be read and enjoyed by the general public as well as regular readers of science fiction.

To our many Canadian readers I must report with regret that the series will not be available in their country, Canadian Rights being reserved in with general North American Rights. Some of the titles we shall be publishing have already appeared in their country in American editions. There is, however, nothing to stop Canadians subscribing direct should they desire to collect the British editions. Readers in other parts of the Commonwealth should have no difficulty in obtaining copies from their usual retailers.

The Best from 'New Worlds'

T. V. Boardman & Co., Ltd., London, whose science fiction publishing programme is by far the most progressive in this country, are to produce a yearly pocketbook anthology of stories selected from this magazine under the above title, price 2/-. The first selection will be on sale in the Spring.

Messrs. Boardman will also publish at about the same time popular author E. C. Tubb's first hard-cover novel *Alien Dust*, based on material from his Martian series of short stories published previously in *New Worlds*. Additional material has been added and a chronological sequence of events and characters worked into the framework of the struggling colony.

Tailpiece . . .

Statement of (minor) editorial policy. British readers will be well aware of the science fiction short story competition recently promulgated by the national Sunday newspaper the *Observer*. As of now and until further notice this magazine is not interested in 3000 word stories with plots situated in the year 2500 A.D. (!) There may be some usable plots in the thousands of rejects that contest will produce —but at least they will have to be rewritten to suit the policy of this magazine.

John Carnell

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Alister Conrad's first thoughts upon recovering consciousness were confused and not a little frightening. An identity card told him his name but he could remember nothing about his previous life. As he attempts to establish his past identity he becomes involved in a fascinating and complicated series of mysteries that, for sheer suspense, never cease.

PRISONER IN THE SKULL

By Charles Dye

Illustrated by QUINN

Part One of Three Parts

I.

He awoke . . . Time, without beginning or end, was his only awareness. Then, slowly, his eyes opened and focussed up through towering trees, up into a gigantic vault of light and darkness. Shining clouds riding the night wind scuttled beneath the moon and stars, leaving the black sky mottled with great patches of blue and silver.

The wind grew stronger, blowing little flurries of leaves and twigs across his face on its journey through the night. Suddenly fear chilled him. He slapped at his face and the things brushing it, until pain stung him into further awareness. He sat up and stared at the leaves still whirling and eddying around him like butterflies in the moonlight . . .

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Sometime later, he became conscious of dawn, silent and grey, creeping up through the darkness. He stumbled to his feet and several objects fell rustling into the leaves.

Shotgun shells.

Hurriedly he searched his pockets. More shells, a knife, cigarettes, handkerchiefs, a jetpen, a silver-edged wallet. With trembling hands he zipped open the wallet. An identity card fluttered to the ground. He picked it up and stared at it.

> Alister Conrad (retina-pattern No. 12-39276)
> 42 Sky Terrace
> Manhattan, New York
> TV No. SKY TERRACE 9-4319
> Heliojet No. NY 484-419
> In emergency notify
> Mrs. Laura Conrad above address, or
> Sleep-Tanks, Inc.
> Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey

All tension suddenly vanished and he felt a strange exhilaration.

He was someone named Conrad, who had a wife, and who worked for Sleep-Tanks, Inc. After replacing the identification, he found a credit card with the month of September stamp-punched New Jersey. All prior months were stamped New York. He felt the heavy stubble of beard covering his face. Was he still somewhere in Jersey?

Dawn slowly dissolved into a turquoise sky and the forest quietly came to life. He started walking towards the shafts of sunlight streaming through the trees from the east. Then pain momentarily flashed up the back of his head. He turned, keeping on his feet with an effort, but there was no one behind him, there had been no blow.

When his head and vision cleared, he carefully felt the back of his skull. His fingers touched the rough scab of a narrow wound. Had he been out hunting and met with an accident? He must have, because he was dressed for it—boots, corduroy trousers, leather jacket full of shotgun shells. Everything but the gun—which could have been lost when he lost his memory, whenever and wherever that had been. He also began to wonder when he had last eaten.

He again started towards what he hoped would be New York and the Hudson River. His head was throbbing, but it took his mind off hunger and thirst, and his exhilaration somehow stayed with him.

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All morning long he crossed fields and meadows and stretches of wood over which the bonfires of autumn burned in brilliant reds and yellows. The wind and clouds, the meadow larks, the sparrows—all these things he knew and recognised, as well as he recognised his awareness of self. But of any link between these things and himself, of any action or emotion of his past identity, there was not even a trace. Only nothingness . . .

The dying sun smeared bloody light over the western facade of the towering concrete jungle that was New York. The last great urban erection, a monument to a way of life that had died with the advent of cheap transportation for everyone—the heliojets. Now, the city was one vast Babylon of hanging gardens and skyscraper terraces inhabited by a remaining microcosm of powerful and decadent ultra-rich, who shunned the decentralised village life which had evolved out of the Third World War.

Beneath this was the still smaller microcosm of the lower depths composed of the genetically defective, the *unsane*. Theirs was a world of shadows and stale odours and sickly sunlight trickling down through lucite landing platforms high overhead. Streets were no longer used except for heavy commerce and maintenance. All shopping, entertainment, and business was done from the sky.

The man who earlier in the day had discovered he was Alister Conrad walked wearily across the northern remains of Central Park. Ahead of him, the tall columns of steel and glass and concrete were growing dim and shadowy in the fading light. It seemed a city without life. He had come over George Washington Bridge and walked southward without seeing a sign of inhabitants except for the heliojets coming and going from the Manhattan towers to the south.

He felt weak and tired, and he debated whether to go on hunting for people, or hope that people would eventually come to him. But it was cold in the Park and growing colder. It seemed more comfortable to keep walking. His exhilaration had left him long ago.

As night and the moon and stars again appeared, he glimpsed a thin trickle of radiance coming through the trees in the southwest from the darkened, decaying streets of the city.

Sometime later, he was standing before an ill lit sign: JOE'S FLOP-HOUSE. Underneath, someone had crudely penciled, " Where you never sleep alone!" He wandered further down the street until he came to another sign, a defective neon buzzing and flashing, THE LAST MILE. The window was so grimy he couldn't see inside, but he recognised it as a bar and grill.

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He stumbled into a murky interior saturated with the smell of sawdust and stale beer. A big horse-faced man with a cigar in his mouth and five glittering diamonds on his hands stood polishing the bar.

Conrad was startled by the raw huskiness of his own voice. "Have you got a t-v I can use?"

Without looking up, the bartender motioned to a booth across the room. Conrad discovered it was coin-operated and he didn't have any coins. Going back to the bar, he flipped his credit card and asked for change.

"What are you, a hophead? Credit cards are no good down here!"

"I don't have any money and I have to—"

"That's tough! Now get the hell outa here—wait! Let's see that watch."

Conrad for the first time noticed the self-winding chronometer on his left wrist. He slipped it off and handed it to him. After examining it the bartender flipped him a dime.

"Is that all I get?"

"Yeah!" the man bellowed.

Several of the customers leered and snickered at him as he recrossed the sawdust floor and squeezed into the tiny booth. Carefully inserting the coin, he dialled Sky Terrace 9-4319.

An attractive looking blonde popped into view and said in a bored voice, "Yes?" Suddenly she started—then screamed. The t-v went dead.

Stunned, he stood there staring at the blank screen. It was stuffy in the booth and he could feel sweat trickling down from his armpits. Just how long had he been away, he wondered? Long enough to be numbered among the dead? Something had made her shock-react. But why didn't she come to her senses and t-v him back? Surely she could have his call traced. If he only had another dime. His face was clammy with perspiration, but he waited several more minutes before finally leaving the booth.

Hunger knots were twisting his stomach and his head was pounding again. The day's exertion had descended on him with the suddenness of a falling wall. Across the room the bartender was talking to one of the customers and eating a sandwich. As he watched, his stomach seemed on the verge of devouring itself.

He walked over and gripped the edge of the bar. "Listen," he said weakly, "I haven't tasted food in—"

He was cut off by a loud guffaw of laughter. "Don't worry, it still tastes the same!" The whole room laughed. "Now, Lockjaw, throw this floater out!"

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A little weasel of a man jumped up from somewhere and gave Conrad a shove that sent him sprawling toward the door. Then he was grabbed by the scruff of the coat and dragged out into the night.

He lay half on the sidewalk and half in the street. A chill wind started to blow, turning his body to ice. His head wouldn't clear. Little fragments of awareness tumbled around and around without coming into focus. Later, he began to notice the stars overhead. They shone just as brightly from the gutter as from a mountain top.

Then he noticed an unsavoury looking character stepping over from the shadows, and a somewhat oily voice said, "How ya feelin', friend? Don't pay any attention to ol' Moose in there. He wouldn't give anyone the right time of day. You and me'll go down to Dynamite Jackson's—he'll fix ya up. Why, he's so rich that if he dropped a five-dollar bill he couldn't afford to spend the time to pick it up. Of course, now, Dynamite'll ask ya to do a couple of little services for him—but ya won't mind that, will ya now?"

Conrad managed to get to his feet and see the man more clearly. He looked like an overstuffed squirrel. "No, so long as I get to 42 Sky Terrace." He no longer cared what he agreed to.

"Sure, sure. Just stick with Hypo Ned here, he'll show ya all the buttons—even fix ya up with a new identity, if ya need one."

They started off down the street.

"Come on, come on, friend. We gotta step on it. It's not safe to be out in the open like this—not in your shape."

Suddenly a soft whirring echoed up the dark canyon of the street, and a shadow blotted out the moonlight in front of them.

Ned glanced up, then grabbed Conrad's arm. "A patroller! Let's get outta here before they drop a paralyzer!"

Conrad managed to keep up with him until a frightened cat jumped in his path. He tripped and fell. By the time he got to his feet, Ned had vanished into the shadows. Conrad lay on the sidewalk, wondering why he had been running. Laura must have traced his call after all —and sent out the police to pick him up. She might even be with them.

There was a soft *plop* behind him. He turned and saw, mushrooming up from the street, a thin spray of greenish vapour expanding so rapidly that it engulfed him before he could move. Every muscle in his body went rigid. His vision froze on a black heliojet settling quietly in front of him. Two uniformed men stepped out. Cold moonlight glinted sharply off their polished buttons as they walked over to him. A flash was held on his face while they expertly frisked him. His wallet was yanked out and opened.

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"This is the bird, all right," said the man with the flash. "Fits the description, whiskers and all."

"Yeah," said the other, "and here's Conrad's wallet, complete with identification and credit cards."

"Okay, slap on the cuffs and give him the needle."

His wrists were pulled together and manacled. Then the man with his wallet took out a transparent tube and scratched his neck, squeezing the tube flat. Life flowed back into his muscles and he was escorted into the heliojet.

Once in the air, he finally found strength enough to talk. "I don't understand this. What's happening—where are we going?"

With a deadpan expression one of the men turned and said, "To the cooler for a little talk and checkup. The charges—impersonating a dead man and suspicion of possible murder."

After a doctor verified his need for nourishment, he was fed and given a dose of amino acids. Then he was taken to a long low-ceilinged room. At one end, clustered around a huge switchboard desk, were several technicians and plainclothes men. He was told not to ask questions or talk unless told to. Someone came over from behind the desk and held a binocular-shaped gadget up to his eyes. There was a dull blue flash, then the device was plugged into a socket on the switchboard.

A man whose face was covered by a shadow, cleared his throat and said in a flat mechanical voice, "Today is October twelfth. On September second, over a month ago, Alister Conrad was flown by his wife Laura Conrad to the Northern New Jersey State Hunting Preserve for a weekend of hunting. She was to pick him up at one of the supply shelters the following Monday. After waiting there all day Monday, she became alarmed and notified the authorities that he was missing. A search was made of the area—all that was found was his camping pack and gun. In the gun there was one empty shell. No other clues were found. No one answering his description was ever seen or reported. It was believed that he had met with some accident—possibly his gun going off or perhaps even suicide—then wandered off to an inaccessible place and died.

"This evening Mrs. Conrad called us and said that an exact replica of her husband had televised her. She was so shocked for a moment that she accidentally disconnected. She waited several minutes for him to call back. When he didn't, she grew alarmed and had the call traced to a surface dive. Then she called us—"

A light started blinking, followed by a sharp buzz. From somewhere a punched card appeared in front of the man hidden in the shadows.

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" This is a retina pattern check from Central Identification," the man continued. " Your pattern which we just took corresponds with that of Alister Conrad."

Conrad felt his body suddenly relax. Now everything should start making sense.

" We're sorry about this, Mr. Conrad. But with bootleg fingerprints and plastic surgery what it is, we can't be too careful. As you know, the only positive check any more is the retina." The man's hand reached over to the t-v and dialled a number.

" Yes," a breathless feminine voice answered. " It wasn't him, was it ?"

" It's your husband, yes. Shall we take him home or do you want to come—"

From the other end there was a sharp intake of breath. " No, no —I'll be right over !"

The hand clicked off the screen. " You can talk now, Mr. Conrad. Perhaps while waiting for your wife you would care to tell us what happened."

Confusion swept over him. Where had he been for over a month ? Obviously not in the Preserve all that time. What had he been doing ? *If he could only remember* ! " I—don't know. I can't seem to remember anything past—past awakening last night."

There was hurried whispering behind the desk. Finally the shadow-covered man said, " Possibly, due to some trauma or unpleasant reality you did not want to face, your corti-thalamic synapses have been warped. The memory of your identity has been suppressed, blocked off from the normal channels of thought, the gap in logic and memory being bridged by rationalization. If the unpleasant thing being avoided lies directly in the route of one of the main lines of integration of the personality, to avoid encountering the thought, every other integration, generalization, or decision must be rerouted, sometimes getting lost or coming out a mistaken integration. This uses up a great deal of mental energy and tends to keep the subject in his abnormal state, due to the constant working of the corti-thalamic defense-alertness integrations which feed and sustain the psychic energy in the road block."

The flat drone of the man's voice was soothing and somehow reassuring.

The man continued, " True, you retain all bodily habits and body memories—the patterns left in your mind are the patterns of logic habits, deductions, induction, and prediction, their integration web work being grooved-in on the mind far deeper than specific memories ever are. However, the continued effort to suppress memory is a

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crippling drain on mental energy. Whatever you're trying to avoid, must be faced. Ultimately there is no profit in amnesia."

The man glanced at his wrist. "Your wife should be here. Possibly something has detained her. In which case, we may have your memory back before she arrives."

Sudden hope and his first real eagerness of the day made Conrad sit up straighter in spite of his tiredness.

"Upstairs in Medico we have an auxiliary spur from Central Psycho —a modified electro-encephalograph—which will temporarily suspend all corti-thalamic connections, cutting the emotional drive that sustains the block, so we can reach and map the trauma—"

The mumbo-jumbo droned on and on. Finally he heard himself agreeing to something termed "the treatment."

Up in Medico a worried little doctor with big eyes and bigger glasses greeted him, then sat him down in something resembling an electric chair. Wires and metal discs were connected to his head and chest.

". . . feeds the subject a shot of euphoric," the doctor was saying, "that removes all fear, worry, anxiety—so that a clear alpha reading can be obtained on the three levels of personality integration. This will be compared with the B pattern, your current conscious pattern, the one we are now going to map and suppress prior to the alpha reading."

Suddenly he reached up and jabbed a hypodermic into Conrad's neck. He felt a terrific jolt that seemed to turn his body to liquid . . .

He was silently swimming in a warm darkness . . . high overhead, a dim flicker of light appeared . . . he swam toward it and it grew immense, dissolving the darkness around him . . .

He became aware of a rusty sound, like several machines squeaking at each other. Then he was back in Medico and the squeaking resolved itself into a furious discussion taking place between several men behind him. The voice of the little doctor with the big eyes and glasses broke through:

". . . I tell you it is infallible! It will register anything inside sigma two-point-seven. No, it's not the encephalograph, it's he."

"But look at the alpha card!" another voice said. "The machine refuses to give any data whatever. We get no integration pattern!"

Another voice broke in. "There is a slight tissue-injury reading dorso medially. Do you think that could have any bearing?"

Conrad felt the back of his head being fingered.

"Not enough for complete blockage."

"Look here, doctor," a new voice said. "Wouldn't you say this was once a burn?"

They moved around in front of him, still arguing.

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"Wait a minute! The one possible thing that might explain it all is that, in some freakish way, he was struck by lightning." The little doctor had his glasses off and was twirling them in one hand. "In which case, by some sort of electrical erasure, his alpha integration pattern was blocked at various points and he necessarily rerouted and reintegrated in a pattern so abnormal the encephalograph cannot chart it. In other words, it is past deviation range sigma two-point-seven. Since there is nothing psychologically wrong with him, at least with which the machine can cope, the only other alternative is in the hope that the natural treatment of positive and negative conditioning by life will, in time, rebuild the associations."

So they couldn't give him back his memory after all! A feeling of loneliness and loss crept into him.

He was ushered back down to Interrogation. The man who had talked from behind a shadow was gone. In his place was a nondescript man carefully smoking a cigarette. He ignited a second one across the bottom of the pack lying on his desk and handed it to Conrad. Conrad was conscious of a vague unease in the room.

The man coughed slightly and said almost in a whisper, "Now there's nothing to become alarmed over, Mr. Conrad, but something seems to have happened to your wife. She hasn't arrived here and she's not at home. While we're checking on her, we suggest you let us fly you home. Besides, it's important that your orientation start as soon as possible amid familiar surroundings."

II.

Conrad forced his tired eyes to focus on the "trimensional" photograph above the bookcase. Waves of loneliness flooded through him. Everything about her was exaggerated and severe, blonde upswept hair, magenta lipstick, arched eyebrows, and over all, the cold enamelled glamour of the very rich. For a heart she probably had a highball glass full of ice-cubes. He smiled inwardly at that simile. Nevertheless he wanted her badly—needed her, was more like it. For she, of all people, must have been closest to him—she, of all people, could help him find his past, his real self. Funny how he recognised or seemed to recognise the familiarity of everything but himself and his own life. It was like having an awareness that was somehow going to be permanently out of focus.

From somewhere, a muffled chime cut through the stillness, counting out the hour of midnight. Home exactly one hour. So far, not the slightest connection had come between his former life and his present.

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Trying to remember was like staring at a blank wall. But they had said it would take time, possibly years.

Years with half his life-memory hidden behind a blank wall.

He stared at the photo opposite his wife's, that of a handsome man approaching middle age. The hair was light brown and parted on the side, then slicked back straight. The ears lay flat against the head, giving a smooth, fast and deadly appearance to an otherwise bland and pleasant countenance dominated by smiling brown eyes. He turned away and glanced into the smoke-tinted mirror above the fireplace. He was hardly even a shadow of his former self, the man in the photo. Only his narrow brown eyes remained unchanged but they weren't smiling now. Maybe, though, once he got rid of the matted growth of beard . . .

He let the thought trail off with a weary sigh and collapsed on the airfoam sofa. There was also a brighter side. At least he was rich, probably even powerful, judging from his expensive surroundings and the respect with which the authorities had eventually treated him. And in prowling around the house he had discovered in his study that he was president and owner of Sleep-Tanks, Inc.—an outfit that apparently made sleeping tanks, whatever they were. From the looks of his bedroom he didn't use one. Probably they were something manufactured for invalids or mental cases.

In spite of the sluggish tiredness of his body he got up and began walking aimlessly around the pastel-tinted living room. What *had* happened to Laura? The security patrolman who had flown him home said that if she had met with a heliojet accident they would know about it within the hour and notify him.

He dialled the t-v. A warm reassuring voice told him that quite frequently it took longer than an hour to locate an accident, particularly if it were necessary to go down into the Lower Depths and round up floaters for interrogation.

After several more minutes of walking in circles he decided that the best thing he could do to keep from stripping his nerves was to put himself to sleep. Earlier, he had checked the medicine chest for soporifics and found nothing. Now, he searched the bar and pantry for something to drink. There was only a half-empty fifth of rye and some cordials. Finally he decided to try the shopping centre he had noticed at one end of the Terrace. In his bedroom he found a wardrobe of clothes. He changed into a tan lounge suit and a pair of loafers with pneumatic soles that were easy on his tired feet, then he went silently through the house and out the front door. It closed automatically behind him with a soft click.

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Sky Terrace was a long, sweeping colonnade of neo-Grecian landscaping. Curving balustrades of white marble and tile gleamed dully in the windy starlight. Towering poplars and black cypresses rustled dryly overhead as he walked down the winding arbour of trees and shrubbery. Somewhere off to his left a pair of heliojet landing lights illuminated the landing platforms atop several residences. Then past that, darkness again.

He had already entered the drugstore before realising he had no money. But the clerk recognised him, in spite of his stubble of beard, and cashed his credit card for the month of October. Now he had money. After buying two bottles of Scotch, Conrad dropped a coin into the news teletype and tucked the freshly printed sheet under his arm on his way out.

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Back in front of his door he peered into the quartz slot next to his mailing and receiving tube and waited for his retina pattern to identify him and unlock the door.

Inside, he checked the t-v tape secretary for any messages, then went into the bathroom and took a shower. After wiping off his beard with depilatory, he tumbled into bed with the newspaper and Scotch. Before opening the paper he forced himself to gulp down two heavy slugs. Slowly he began to relax.

He skipped the headlines about himself and the disappearance of his wife, down to the small type.

> . . . the outlawing of sleep-tanks by the World Council on recommendation of Unesco just prior to Alister Conrad's ill-fated hunting weekend, was the main supposed reason behind the suicide theory advanced later by Laura Conrad. Once Conrad regains his mental and physical health it will be interesting to learn what accident actually did befall him.
>
> Sleep-Tanks, Inc., was closed down by order of World Council six months after its incorporation, when it was discovered that an alarming number of world citizens were undergoing suspended animation in order to see, as the advertisements said, " Any desired portion of the near or far future in your own lifetime !"
>
> . . . Alister Conrad, referred to by some as one of the few remaining exploiter-capitalists, at all times refused to say how he had come by the secret and highly complex process manifested and maintained by the sleep-tank—whereby the subject inside was frozen instantaneously without the usual ice-crystals forming that ordinarily rupture body cell—

Conrad read no further. He took one more deep swig directly from the bottle before turning out the light. He tried desperately to compose himself for sleep, but events of the day with the vanishing of Laura and the new knowledge that he was now without means of livelihood kept him twisting and turning under the bedclothes. These tag-lines of orientation continued playing hide-and-seek and chasing around in his head until he finally lost consciousness.

Sometime later, he awoke feeling alternately hot and cold. His room, illuminated dimly by cold starlight shining through a glass wall, gave the impression of rocking and rolling, like a ship. His body felt as heavy as stone. So heavy, that he seemed unable to raise either arms or legs—or even eyes. Yet, slowly, he felt himself floating up

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from the bed, then out through the French windows of the sunporch and into the windy night.

He found himself being propelled over the porch and towards the narrow strip of rock garden beyond. Then he was drifting over the wall and down into darkness.

He tried to scream and couldn't. Distorted impressions shifted through his mind . . . from somewhere a gigantic hypodermic needle materialized, drawing closer . . . closer . . . only to dissolve into an unsavoury-looking character with an oily voice. " Now just let Hypo Ned fix up those chicken scratches behind your eyes and everything will be all right." Overhead a neon sign began to blink :

DYNAMITE JACKSON'S

DYNAMITE JACKSON'S

DYNAMITE JACKSON'S

DYNAMITE JACKSON'S

Suddenly all colour, all brightness, all light was being pulled from his eyes, as a magician pulls rabbits from out of a hat. Blackness stabbed into his brain. He couldn't see ! He was blind !

A thin mocking echo of a voice started hammering in his ears. " Help the blind man. Help the blind man. Help the blind man." It was his own voice. Then up ahead he saw something small and moving coming towards him. And a little child shall lead them, he thought.

Someone grabbed his hand roughly and yanked. " Come on, dammit ! Don't want to lose all yer sleep, do ya ?" The voice was not that of a little child.

His eyes ached, his head ached, but feeling slowly returned to his body. Now he would get away. Now !

He jerked his hand away from what seemed nothing and began to run. Someone was pounding after him. It was hard running because he was lying on his back with heavy nets covering him.

His eyes suddenly opened. He found himself staring straight into molten sunlight. But the pounding was growing louder. He tried to run again and fell flat on the floor, tangled in the bed clothes. Slowly it dawned on him that the heavy pounding was someone at the door. He got himself untangled and into a lounging robe.

Two patrolmen were standing outside and both started talking at once. " We're sorry, Mister Conrad, about waking you. We tried videoing you first, then the buzzer—"

" We've been instructed," the other said, " to escort you to Unesco headquarters. We'll wait while you dress."

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Conrad started to ask why.

" We have no idea, Mister Conrad."

Something in their tone decided him to do as they directed. His head and eyes still ached from the sudden glare of sunlight, but his mind seemed curiously calm and clear.

Unesco was the advisory organisation to the World Council. Now why would the power-behind-the-throne wish to see him, he wondered as he finished dressing ?

And where was his wife ?

The patrol officers turned him over to a young woman with honey-brown hair and stylish glasses. She looked at him as if he were the type that made a practice of sleeping every night in his clothes.

" This way, please," she said primly, being careful to keep a certain distance between herself and him.

They passed down through endless corridors and doors, occasionally stopping as someone questioned their orders, and finally into a private elevator that shot skyward with the speed of a jet.

It stopped abruptly and he was ushered out into an immense low-ceilinged room completely vacant except for one huge desk and row upon row of books and microfilm. Behind the desk, bent down over some work, was a beautiful auburn-haired woman. And behind her was a battery of t-v receiving and scanning screens. She didn't look up as they paused inside the entrance.

" This is Doctor Val von Rachin, co-ordination directress of World Education," the young woman whispered in a hushed voice. " She knows all about you so you needn't introduce yourself."

He was aware of his guide leaving him and the door softly closing behind him.

Dr. Val von Rachin rose from her desk and said in a low, competent voice, " It's rather difficult to converse at such a distance, Mr. Conrad. Won't you join me ?"

He thought he detected a faint twinkle in her voice and manner. He hadn't realised he had been standing there staring. She was wearing a crisp, steel-blue tailored suit revealing a lush figure more fitting to the boudoir than World Education. The strange contrast jangled across his nerves like a fingernail across a blackboard.

Automatically he walked forward to a chair beside the desk. Her eyes peered down into his. They matched the steel-blue of her suit. He suddenly found it impossible to tear his eyes away from her gaze. Without further preamble she began talking quietly and smoothly.

" According to tentative reconstruction by paleontologists, in the age of reptiles there was a small family of lizards which had evolved

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a third eye. One branch of this family, by some stupendous fluke, developed telepathic powers. The third eye, which seemed to be involved in these powers, was then of such importance that a thick hide grew defensively over it, cancelling its function of sight. This tiny telepathic lizard, then, by its telepathy was in a situation that would not occur again for millions of years, until its descendants were mammals."

A serious heavy quality crept into her voice :

" But later, in mammals, the growth of the cerebral cortex isolated the telepathic centre, crowding the pineal body, the ancient third eye, away from the primitive lizard-section of the brain. Only occasionally, in a faultily developing brain or by injury to an unborn child, does the pineal body attach itself to the nearest folds of the cerebrum, thus becoming integrated into the highest centres of intelligence in a flood of clarity and power."

As she finished, the quiet softness was again in her voice, contrasting sharply with the grotesqueness of her narration. He noticed that she was smiling warmly at him and waiting.

" Surely you don't expect me to comprehend all this ?" Mentally he kicked himself for having said such an absurd thing. " That is, I mean—in relation to myself."

Her eyes, which had never for an instant wavered from his, continued to hold his gaze. " Suppose that sometime during the last half-century the damaged brain tissues of an unborn child had caused an adhesion of the pineal to the cerebral cortex. Then assume that this child had been born normal in all other respects—" She paused, leaving the blank for him to fill in. " Now if such a person were living today he would have certain advantages over others—a certain power. He would always be one jump ahead . . ."

Suddenly, like an explosion, what she was driving at hit him.

Still smiling, she watched his expression change from puzzlement to incredulous comprehension. Then in almost a whisper she slowly said " Yes."

For awhile there was silence as the tremendousness of what he thought was her implication sank further in. A light sweat broke out on his face and his underclothes began to feel clammy against his body. It still quite wasn't making sense. He couldn't read minds, he couldn't even remember his own past. He opened his mouth and for a moment nothing would come out. Then—

" You mean that I'm a—"

" No," she cut him off. " Not you—someone else."

A vast wave of relief flooded through him, dissolving the tension that had built up with such swiftness over the past several minutes.

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" Even a man of average intelligence," she continued, " with the help of this single talent, *telepathy*, would not only be one jump ahead of everyone, but would also be able, after awhile, to recognise, store, and integrate data, then evaluate correctly the result and arrive at a correct decision long before other individuals simply by picking their brains first."

He realised that she was pausing, waiting for him to ask the next obvious question. He suddenly felt as cool and collected as she looked. Even the disturbing quality of her appearance and personality had ceased to disconcert him—although he kept in mind that a voluptuous figure nearly always was the sign of an arrogant and aggressive temperament.

" As interesting as this all is, why tell me ?" The sudden strength and sureness of his voice gave him even more confidence. But he couldn't quite escape those hypnotic eyes.

" World Education, through Unesco and the World Council, is trying to evolve a universal culture pattern which, instead of trying futilely to make the average man more rational, would control the average man's pattern of irrationality. This plan cannot be completed until the one random factor—the man with the single wild talent—is eliminated. A telepath, especially a highly intelligent one, would not feel sympathetic to the end aims of this organisation. He is more likely to feel hostile to normal people and their irrationalities, since his own mind is threatened by their prejudices and superstitions, which to us, of course, are merely tools."

" Why," he asked, " do you assume this random factor to be hostile?"

" All random factors are hostile, unless there are enough of them to average out. And as far as we know, there is only one such telepath."

She paused again, but this time he didn't answer or question her. Finally, with a flick of her eyebrows, she continued. " For some time I—we have been aware of the existence of such an individual and the threat he poses to world stability. However, tracking him down and destroying him is another matter. Possibly, even, his telepathic powers continue in sleep, for instance. Who would be able to get close enough to eliminate our random factor without first being detected—even presupposing that telepathy of this magnitude is limited by the confusion of numbers and the lack of directional sense ? He might still be able to pick out an inimical thought directed at himself, and it would be instantly detected."

Her voice changed to a more dramatic key. " I've had our psychologists and statisticians draw up dossiers on every available aspect of your past life, Alister Conrad—from your beginning as a child prodigy that fizzled out, through your gradual metamorphosis into a cold and

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ruthless borderline paranoiac in the world of business. The methods by which you gained the necessary technology to design and manufacture sleep-tanks are as good a character tick-off as was the way you exploited the tank for the masses, knowing very well the long range consequences, yet utterly disregarding humanity in general. It is unfortunate that you have had such phenomenal good fortune in living up to the letter of the law while completely disregarding it in spirit. However, with the educational and cultural programmes now set up, in another decade your kind will no longer be tolerated—and in another generation, extinct."

Conrad somehow wasn't appalled at these revelations of his character. Why was she telling him these undiplomatic things? Of course—she must know about his memory. But could loss of memory change one's basic nature? Interrogation had told him no. He continued to stare at her.

She must have realised what he was thinking, because she said, "Yes, your loss of memory. Only slowly will conditioning to life return the ruthless patterns of your earlier nature. That is why we are assured of your co-operation for the present. And that is why you are here now. You are going to find and destroy the random factor we have been discussing! You will be the whip to beat it out."

The telepath! He was shocked. "But how?"

"Through the one advantage you have over all others, even over the random factor—"

"But the pathological aggressiveness of my personality . . . you said it has been dimmed."

"No, I am not referring to your former psychological type as the advantage, although even in its crippled state it will be of some use, since this is one crisis where the end justifies the means—even your kind of means. No, I am referring to an incident which occurred last night. Before Medico had discovered that, by some means, your memory had been erased, they put you under Psycho to discover and remove the supposed usual blockages. Then, for the first time in its history, the machine did not work. It was unable to map your mind. Your mind can be neither mapped nor—read . . . That is why you are here." She paused. "I was wrong. You will not be just the whip—but, shall we say, the handle of the whip?"

What could he say to all this, he wondered? What would he say?

"You will do as Unesco and I wish you to do, for a single reason. Your own ruthless way of life, as well as our sane one, is being jeopardized. All of us are in the same crowded boat."

He realised the truth of this—no matter which side he was on. He wondered if the earlier Alister Conrad, the one she had just outlined

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to him, would ever really return. He hoped not. Because he had just decided that he liked this strange and powerful and beautiful woman, even if she were his potential enemy.

"Yes," he said slowly. "Yes, I see your point."

"I thought you would," came her calm reply. Some of the coldness left her face to be replaced by a look of urgency. "And now briefly the rest of the story . . . Three weeks ago, we received a half-illiterate communiqué from an old French-Canadian woman in Ste-Anne de Beaupre, a small village on the Saint Lawrence River in Quebec, Canada. She said that her only son had disappeared and was in trouble and could we do anything to help her, since she was on her deathbed with only a few weeks left. If he had disappeared, we replied, and she hadn't heard from him, how was it that she knew he was in trouble? Then we received the startling information that he could 'look into minds,' as she termed it, even at great distances, and that if something hadn't happened to him he would surely have known she was dying and come to her. Immediately investigators were sent up to Ste-Anne de Beaupre, and even more astounding things were discovered in the home of Madame de Lamiter.

"The basement had been fitted up as a laboratory-study with enough reference works and microfilm spools to stock a small library. The range of subjects he had studied was phenomenal. And there was enough of his own experimental work lying around to indicate that his knowledge of thermodynamics surpassed even that of the experts. Madame de Lamiter was questioned as to why no one else knew her son's telepathic powers. She replied that he had always wanted them kept secret and that, to her knowledge, we were the first outsiders to know. Prior to his disappearance, which she put at seven or eight months earlier, he had taken what savings there were and gone on a year's trip around the world 'to complete his education.' His age then was twenty-one. He returned with his mind 'not well' and told her that he had to get away from things that were troubling him. Shortly thereafter, he vanished. Nothing could be done for the old lady—she died a week ago.

"Now, Alister Conrad, if you were a telepath what would be your method to escape the intermittent barrage of superstitions, prejudices, and irrationalities of this current civilization?"

Without hesitation he said, "To escape into the future."

"Exactly, and the only possible way to do that would be through the use of a sleep-tank. And when he enters life again, and it's still not to his liking, he might take even more drastic measures to protect his sanity. His vast learning coupled with the tremendous advantage he has over normal man would make him potentially [illegible] of destroying all civilization."

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Conrad was puzzled. "Why didn't you immediately check the Sleep-Tanks, Incorporated, sales records?"

"We discovered that we would have to wait a year before being able to get into your unique time vault where, for some reason, you had placed the records. This all occurred during the time you were believed dead, so we could hardly force you to open the retina lock."

For the first time she dropped her eyes. Simultaneously he became fully aware that, for some reason, she had been actually trying to hypnotize him. He wondered if she had been successful?

The conversation was about to end. Her voice sounded weary. "You will be issued an unlimited credit card as you leave—also the birth retina pattern of Rene de Lamiter. *You will find and destroy him*! Please do not contact me again until your work has been successfully or unsuccessfully completed."

She didn't look up again.

III.

Alister Conrad left the Unesco building by the top entrance and walked with a dreamlike slowness through the windy afternoon sunlight. All the way across town he walked slowly, without considering where he was going. Finally he discovered himself entering the Fifth Avenue Skyline Park. Only then did he become fully conscious of his surroundings. From behind him, somewhere in the autumn foliage, he could hear the tinkle and splash of a water fountain. Something flushed a covey of birds out of a nearby clump of trees. They went chirping and darting over his head, finally to disappear into the south.

For the first time since his return to the land-of-the-living, from wherever he had been, he decided it was good just to be alive—even with only half-a-memory. He sat down on a bench and watched a little girl singing a small song go skipping down the path. He had a sudden longing for the lonely glamour of childhood, until he remembered that it was as lost to him as the rest of his life. From between the boles of two giant oaks directly in front of him he could see across to the western skyline of Manhattan. Above everything, was the Unesco landing platform with its banner flapping against the sky.

Everything had sounded so simple—locate Rene de Lamiter . . . destroy him and his sleep-tank . . . maintain the status quo! He had been almost certain she hadn't hypnotized him—now he wasn't so sure. Either way he would do what she wanted. Why not? She seemed to think he was a good man for murder. And he had nothing better to do. Except—maybe—find his wife.

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But since his meeting with Dr. Val von Rachin, Laura had paled in significance. Nevertheless she was the missing link to the lost half of his memory. Find his wife, find his memory. Those two thoughts were suddenly chasing around in his head like a cat and a rat. And from somewhere between them Val von Rachin's eyes and voice kept getting in the way. As he was walking uptown out of the Skyline Park he decided, hypnosis or not, Val von Rachin had also fascinated him in a sensuous way. The startling contrast between her voluptuousness and her supercharged mind seemed to border areas of unimaginable strangeness.

Suddenly he was surrounded by the hustle and bustle of the Fifth Avenue shopping district and discovered that he was automatically following the olfactory trail of steak and French fries to an all-glass restaurant called The Aquarium. For just a moment he lingered underneath the scent ducts which were used to lure shoppers in off the travelling skyline sidewalks, and savoured the aroma, realising that he hadn't eaten.

It was the middle of the afternoon and he had his pick of tables. After punching the combination of his order and inserting the necessary amount of money, he crossed over to a neat line of vending machines and got a paper from the news teletype. His food was on the table waiting for him when he got back.

Restraining his hunger he ate slowly and read over last night's news about himself in a small repeat column at the bottom of the first page. He was disappointed to find nothing new that might give him a lead on himself or Laura. Why didn't they mention now that he was an amnesic ? Or the startling news that he had broken down the psychograph ? Probably Unesco had requested that they didn't.

The rest of the page was devoted to the ten-year-old Moon Colony and the increasing disputes it was having with the World Council over matters of governing policy. There were almost one million men and women on the Moon engaged in all forms of experimental work in technology, science, even economics and sociology. Currently their only reliance on Earth was for three basic raw materials and soon, not even that, once the first giant interplanetary and interstellar spaceship *Relativity* was completed. An editorial in the back of the paper summed up the situation with, " It took man a million years to effect the World State. Will it take that long again, on an even larger scale, to unite the Solar System ?"

He washed down the last of his steak and fries with an extra cup of coffee, then got up and crossed over to the t-v booths. He dialled Classified Directory and explained that he wanted the detective agencies. Slowly the agency blurbs and addresses floated down the screen. One caught his eye.

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DAVID KYLE
Eye & Finger
Specialty
Needles In Haystacks

After jotting down the address he dialled the t-v number and was told by the tape secretary that Mr. Kyle was out on a case, but if he so desired he could record his name for an appointment at 5:30. Conrad decided to make the appointment. There was a metallic "thank you" as the other end automatically clicked off.

Conrad walked across the Skyline Parkway and onto the slowest of three travelling sidewalk belts. He was at a loose end until 5:30. The first thing he had better do was buy a watch, then either go out to Sleep-Tanks at Atlantic Highlands, or wait until he had seen the detective. He might as well try to put Laura out of his mind until this other business was over. If the authorities couldn't find her, then maybe somebody on the borderline of the law could. At least he intended to make it well worth Kyle's interest to find her, no matter what laws had to be crossed.

For a while he studied the glittering stores as he glided by. Inside, all of them gave the impression of lush cocktail lounges, with their rich leather and plastic-covered merchandise bars. Finally he stepped off the sidewalk into a jewelry salon. He sat down at the bar, picked up a small microphone and stated what he wanted. Several trays of wrist watches automatically slid into place in front of him. After selecting one, he asked one or two questions concerning it—they were answered mechanically by a small speaker next to the mike—then placed his money in the tray and waited for his change and purchase to be shot up from the stockroom. He was continually aware of the electric eye above him watching the whole salon for discrepancies or thefts.

Outside, he threw away the lucite case and notice saying that his chronometer had been powered and adjusted for a fifty-year guarantee. It was still too early for his appointment with Kyle, so he allowed himself to be swept along with the rest of the late afternoon crowds.

A wave of depression descended over him at the sudden thought of what a piece of two-dimensional cardboard his loss of memory had made him. Somehow he didn't even seem real to himself. Something was lacking, something more than just his inability to remember, some little piece of puzzle that somehow or other had become lost—maybe forever. He rounded a corner—the sun still burning dully in the west caught him blindingly in the eyes, and he suddenly felt an overwhelm-

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ing desire to escape from himself. He stepped off the sidewalk in front of a huge, glittering trimensional-televiewpalace. Overhead, a sign shot out blasts of flame.

PRELUDE TO THE STARS
A Musical Drama in Two Acts

He walked into the semi-darkness of the lobby and was led down an aisle and placed against a vertical couch of foam rubber. Foot-rests were attached to his feet. After the theatre was filled, the couch was silently tilted back until it was almost horizontal with the silver trimensional ceiling.

An hour later, he walked out into the dim and melancholy dusk. For the moment anything he could imagine happening to him seemed dwarfed in comparison with the colossal epic he had just seen. The conquest of the Moon—the real prelude to the stars.

" Prelude to the Stars," the tremendous theme of the drama sung by a thousand voices had run throughout the epic up to the very end. Then suddenly the velvet blackness of interstellar emptiness sprinkled with billions of diadems of light, and the closing theme, based on a Thomas Wolfe fragment, " The Starry Meadows of Space."

He spotted a hovering cab and jumped in. It was time to see Kyle.

The " Eye and Finger " operated from a rundown apartment-office building on 67th Street, only five stories above the murky Lower Depths. He had to walk down two flights of stairs to get to Kyle's office. After giving his name to the announcer, the door automatically swung open and he stepped into a combination living-room office illuminated by old-fashioned incandescent lamps. The dim yellow light made everything seem more shabby than it probably was. A thin man in his middle-thirties stepped forward and without a word shook his hand.

" Kyle ?"

" And you're Alister Conrad," Kyle said in an easy voice.

Conrad noticed a blonde almost invisible moustache above Kyle's colourless lips which made him handsome, even dashing in a washed-out sort of way. But his eyes, in spite of their paleness, were what gave Conrad sudden confidence in the man. They possessed an unflickering steadiness and alertness. Here was another type of man who was rapidly becoming extinct—a man who depended solely upon his wits and instincts for survival.

They sat down and Kyle turned on a recorder, not saying a word until Conrad had told him his business and what little he knew concerning his wife's disappearance.

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" The police couldn't find water in the ocean," Kyle finally said, switching off the recorder. He saw Conrad's questioning look and continued. " The Force isn't big enough any more for both civilian and UN administration duties. I know, I used to be a security patrolman before they cut the Force still further due to the gradually diminishing crime graphs. Besides, problems of your nature happen so infrequently they just don't give-a-damn."

" Then how do you manage to make a living ?" Conrad asked.

There was a touch of grimness to Kyle's smile. " Oh, the dividing line between inside the law and outside the law is very tenuous. And occasionally people like you come along."

Yes, thought Conrad, it would probably be very easy to see how he managed once Kyle presented him with the bill.

As if divining his thoughts, Kyle said, " Of course, there's the very large matter of a very large fee. Occasionally clients have a nasty habit of dropping dead or just vanishing to some far-off place. So sometime tonight, unless you have the cash on you, you can stop at a money telestat and have the retainer wired to me. Just as soon as I receive this, I'll start to work. The remainder of my fee will go into escrow."

Conrad mentally whistled when he heard Kyle's price. " And what are the conditions ?"

" There are no conditions. All my cases are dead or alive." Kyle turned and stared out the window, continuing to smile to himself. Apparently Kyle considered the interview closed.

Again, as if reading his thoughts, Kyle said, " Oh, I have enough information. Getting the preliminaries over with quick like this is much better than sitting around all night trying to impress one another."

Kyle was evidently a high-powered character, Conrad thought, as he found himself giving final agreement to his terms.

On the roof again, he walked over to a call box and punched for a cab. He told the pilot to take him to the nearest telestat and wait.

After his unlimited credit card was verified and stamp-punched, he wired the retainer to Kyle. Then he climbed back in the cab and told the pilot to take him out to Sleep-Tanks, Inc., Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey.

" Sorry, but I'm only licensed for the city. Besides this cab doesn't have any out-of-state beam channels."

Conrad suddenly remembered his own heliojet license. But Laura must have taken the jet the night she disappeared. He certainly hadn't noticed it between the mooring posts on his roof. For a moment he debated whether or not he should go out to Sleep-Tanks tonight or wait until morning. He glanced out of the still idling aircab window.

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Inky blackness had settled over everything. The moon, the stars, the sky itself, had vanished under a blanket of late-evening thunder clouds. There was no point in sitting around the rest of the night twirling his thumbs—he was afraid some of his old apprehension and depression might return. No, he might as well go ahead out there now and get the sales records out of his safe. Then he could check the retina patterns tonight against the one Dr. von Rachin had given him and, with a small amount of luck, locate that particular tank the next day and do what had to be done.

"There's a commuter airbus that'll take you out to Red Bank," the pilot said, gunning the jets. "You can probably get cab service from there."

Seconds later Conrad was stepping out on the bus platform. As he crossed over to Information a mighty whirlwind of air almost knocked him down.

"Keep behind the sidewalk lines," a loudspeaker boomed. Conrad looked up to see a dull grey shape disappearing into the darkness directly over him.

Information told him it was the Red Bank airbus and that there wouldn't be another for an hour. In spite of being much calmer than he had been all day, waiting seemed to produce a state of boredom that put his nerves on edge. Probably because his loss of memory had robbed him of anything to occupy his mind. It did him no good to think about the only two things he had to think about—the disappearance of his wife and the disturbing Dr. Val von Rachin—anymore than it did to reflect on his past life.

As he stared out into the murky night the situation that had caught him up suddenly seemed sinister and even deadly. It was already deadly for somebody—somebody he didn't even know—somebody who was homo sapiens superior and therefore should be wiped out. Power is dangerous. And he believed in the logic of Val von Rachin's arguments. Yet he was aware that he had been hypnotically high-pressured into doing what he was about to do. Logic or not, she had taken no chances on any original views of his own developing on the subject.

Murder . . . He looked down to see his hand trembling—and he had chain-smoked half a pack of cigarettes. He got up and walked into the humid night. He glanced over the edge of the glass wall circling the landing stage and stared at a neon sign.

FLY 'EM OFF THE LOT HELIOJET CO.
Buy 'em Sell 'em Rent 'em
HEAP BIGGEST DEAL IN TOWN
Wampum No Object

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With a sudden decision he took the nearest moving ramp over the street and down to the next building. To hell with the airbus. Why not? His credit card was unlimited.

A breezy young man stepped out of nowhere and led him down a long travelling corridor into the showroom where row upon row of glistening jets slowly revolved on display platforms. He purchased the first one that struck his eye, a sleek black model appropriately called *The Needle*. Stretching back from the pincushion-shaped cabin was a long silver jet exhaust matching in colour the three razor-sharp rotor blades overhead.

"Yes, sir!" the young man said smiling, as Conrad handed over his credit card. "Just as soon as your card's verified we'll tack on the five day 'just purchased' license plate, load in four auxiliary spools of fuel, and give you any specified directional beam units covering any city or country in the world."

After his card was returned and the license plate was being attached, Conrad specified beam units for New York and New Jersey. As the units were being installed, the salesman, still smiling broadly, explained the operation of the new ABC simplified beam unit. "Just click the unit on and when Central Control answers, say what city and state you want beam control to."

Conrad thanked him and climbed into the cabin pod. "How do I get out of here?"

"A hydraulic lift under the display platform will raise you up to the roof ramp. From there you're on your own. Good luck, Mr. Conrad, and if we can ever be of service . . ." He stuck his arm inside the open cabin port and gave Conrad a hearty handclasp.

Through the plexiglass cabin ceiling Conrad watched the roof slowly draw nearer. An opening appeared revealing the blackness of the sky. Then he was on the landing stage. Instrument lights had automatically come on the moment he stepped into the cabin. The controls were simple and clearly labelled. Besides the usual array of indicators, there were two throttles, one for the tail-pipe and one for the rotors. Next to them was the ignition button. A feather-light control wheel completed the dashboard arrangement.

He pushed the throttle into take-off position and pressed the igniter. A dull cough followed by a slight tremor were the only things that told him the rotors were kicking over and biting into the night. He eased the wheel back and watched the dim blue circle of the rotor-tip jets. While he was climbing, he switched on the directional unit which in turn triggered off the code number of his heliojet.

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A mechanical voice filled the soundproof cabin. "Central Control to Needle twenty-four NXC. Central Control to Needle twenty-four NXC. Where to, NXC?"

"New Jersey, Atlantic Highlands," Conrad replied.

"Sorry. There is no beam from Atlantic Highlands. Suggest you ride beam to Red Bank ten miles west and take aircab into Highlands. Unless you want manual navigation."

Conrad acknowledged and said no, then turned the unit switch from Contact to Automatic. A series of soft whirrings, followed by a click that locked the control wheel, told him Central Control had now taken over.

At 2,000 feet the gyrocompass spun crazily as Central Control swung *The Needle* around on course. The airspeed indicator registered only 30 miles an hour. He was puzzled until he realized that he still had control of the ship's speed. He eased both throttles into cruising and watched the indicator whirl up to 360.

Suddenly from out of nowhere a streak of fiery blue cut diagonally across his path. He felt his head snap back as the heliojet gave a sickening lunge, almost somersaulting, before it was pulled back on course. The streak of blue had already disappeared into the darkness to the left and in front of him. Somebody flying on manual, he thought. Judging from his own airspeed, the other ship must have been travelling nearly twice as fast.

Heavy spatters of rain began drumming on the cabin and windshield. The green glow from the instruments weirdly illuminated the rivulets as they rolled off into the slipstream. The rain was now coming down in torrents. From somewhere under his feet, warm currents of convected air circulated up through the cabin.

He must have dozed, because he straightened up with a start as the metallic voice of Control again filled the cabin. "Needle twenty-four NXC . . . Red Bank in sixty seconds. When you hear the beep note cut the throttles down to land."

The beep note came and Conrad closed the throttles. Slowly the altimeter sank as the ship descended into the rain-washed darkness.

IV.

At the Tower's direction he switched to manual and taxied *The Needle* into an empty parking igloo on one side of the field. Then he made a dash for the rain-streaked lights marking the airlift buildings.

The arrival-departure lounge was empty except for a sleepy-eyed clerk nodding over a half-finished game of solitaire. "Arrived—

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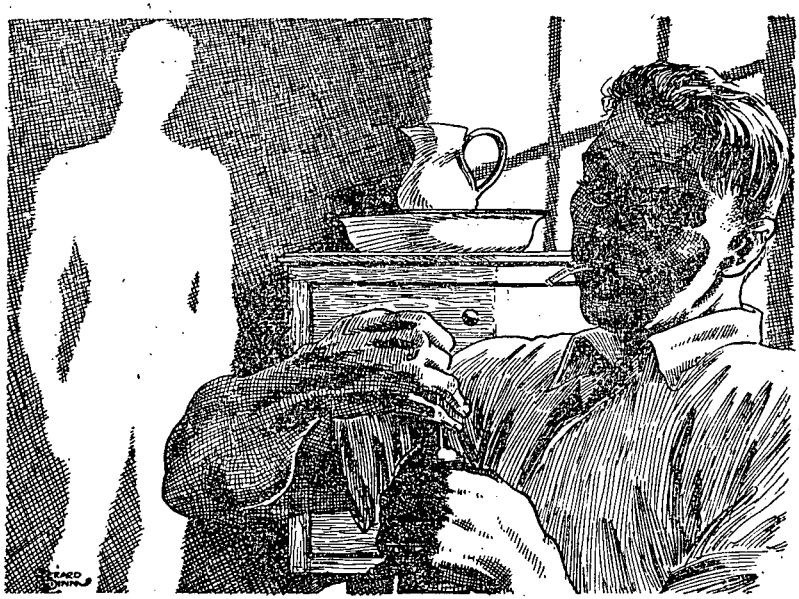

half-drowned—one man," he said boredly, watching Conrad shake the water from his hair and face.

Conrad ignored him and plugged two coins into the nearest coffee vending machine. He tossed the two containers of coffee down like shots of whisky. Then it occurred to him that he ought to give Sleep-Tanks a call before going out there. Somewhere in one of the news sheets he had read that, just after his disappearance, a caretaker had been appointed to the premises—presumably until what was left of his estate could be disposed of. He realised now that these were details he should have checked on before leaving Manhattan.

He walked over to a long line of t-v booths, entered the first one and told the operator to give him Sleep-Tanks, Inc. He copied down

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the Sleep-Tanks number from the operator, but was beginning to wonder if she had dialled it correctly herself. He was about to call her back, when the screen at the other end buzzed and finally lit up, revealing the weather-beaten face of a grey-haired man with a pipe clenched between his teeth.

" Sleep-Tanks, Incorporated, caretaker speak—" His wavery old voice broke off and he peered closer, removing his pipe. " Why, I do believe it's Mr. Conrad—isn't it ?" His eyes went into a squint. " I seen your picture on the—"

Conrad cut him off. " I'm over in Red Bank. I'm coming over to get some files out of the safe-vault."

" Come right ahead. The south entrance next to my cubicle will be open and I'll go and unlock your office and switch—"

The screen at the other end suddenly went dead. He waited an instant, then dialled again. When he got no answer he dialled the operator and told her he had been cut off.

" You were not cut off, sir. Probably a short connection, sir, due to the storm. We've had several other complaints—" He didn't bother to hear the rest.

Outside the rain had stopped, but a raw north wind had started blowing that chilled him to the bone. He hopped into a waiting air-cab and told the pilot where-to.

The sky had broken up into patches of muddy clouds that occasionally let through stray beams of moonlight. Once or twice he glimpsed the dark outline of Sandy Hook and the small cluster of lights on the inlet marking Atlantic Highlands. They slowly descended over the huge lucite dome housing the air-conditioned grounds of Sleep-Tanks.

They sat down in a narrow street fronting the south entrance. Except for another heliojet parked further up the block, the street was dark and deserted. Conrad paid his fare, then on second thought told the pilot to wait—that he would be back in a few minutes.

Set inside the main entrance gates was a heavy revolving glass door which Conrad pushed through into the domed-over grounds. It was warmer inside than out, but long ago the air-conditioning had been turned off, leaving the place stale and muggy. A thin trickle of light coming from the caretaker cubicle contrasted sharply against the dark shadowy hulks of the other buildings. The whole place was sound-proofed for near-absolute silence. Even his footfalls, as he walked over to the cubicle, were muffled on the rubber sidewalk.

A small sign tacked to the door read, John Jameson—Caretaker. Conrad gave a couple of knocks, then pushed the door open. " Jameson —" But the cubicle was empty. He stepped inside and sat down in the single chair. Where was Jameson ? Probably opening up his

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office. Conrad glanced around the tiny room. In one corner was a toilet and shower, in another a hotplate and small refrigerator. The other furnishings consisted of a cot and wardrobe. Portable switchboards and video scanners filled the rest of the room. Conrad picked up a magazine of historical Wild West stories and idly thumbed through it several times.

Ten minutes went by and still no Jameson. Conrad stuck his head out the door and called Jameson's name several times. The soundproofing gave his voice a curiously dead effect. No sense he decided in yelling—his voice probably wasn't carrying over twenty yards. Maybe Jameson had gone outside somewhere to fix the t-v short circuit. He looked over to the main outside t-v screen. Then he noticed Jameson's pipe lying on the floor in a scatter of ashes next to the foot switch. He crossed over and put the pipe on the cabinet, then stepped on the foot switch and dialled the operator. The screen lit up. "Your call, please?"

Conrad cut her and walked back and sat down. Nothing wrong with the t-v. What could have happened to Jameson? His roving eye caught several bottles sticking out from under the refrigerator. Then he spotted a two-thirds empty bottle of Old MacKinsey at the head of the cot. If Jameson had been drinking, that might explain everything. Probably the old boy had staggered into something around the grounds or in the main office building and knocked himself out.

Conrad got up and studied the switchboard, wondering where his private office was located. The board was divided into labelled sections —he peered closely at the administrative one. Under each button was a tiny printed name. F. Grisby; G. P. Potterboy; Mr. Alister Conrad, Pres. Above the name were midget video screens. Conrad jammed his button in so that the ringing at the other end would—he hoped—direct him to his office once he got inside the Administration Building.

He hunted around until he found a flashlight. Lying next to it was a stungun which he picked up and examined before pocketing the flash. The gun made him feel uneasy and cautious. What *had* happened to Jameson? He hadn't acted drunk over the t-v. For some reason Conrad remembered the heliojet that had cut past him in the sky—and the jet parked up front of the south entrance in the street. He suddenly felt irritated with himself for trying to imagine things *What things*? For all he knew the other jet might belong to Jameson. Nevertheless, he pocketed the stungun with the flash. The deathly silence of the place was beginning to get on his nerves. He helped himself to Jameson's Old MacKinsey before stepping out into the soundless dark.

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The grounds and buildings were a vague patchwork of moving shadows as, high overhead, fanshaped clouds blew across the moon. Each shadow-movement increased his apprehension as he went deeper into the grounds.

Finally, with the use of the flash, he spotted the Administration. There were no windows, only a transparent entrance door. At his approach, it was automatically opened by a photo-electric cell. Once inside he became calmer. There were no shadows, just pitch blackness.

He breathed a silent sign when, at the first corridor, his flash picked out a door marked with his name. A ring of keys hung down from the lock. Jameson must have done his passing out inside. He put the keys inside his pocket and pushed open the door a crack. The t-v was still softly ringing and the lights were on. Quickly he stepped in and glanced around the luxuriously appointed office. There was no sign of Jameson. Where could he be? Doors open, lights on, the ring of keys . . .

He stuck his head out into the dark corridor and called his name loudly. Only the echo of his voice answered.

The mystery of Jameson could wait until later, he decided, turning back into the room and closing the door. He crossed the rich pneumatic carpet over to his desk and cut off the ring of the t-v. To do so, he had to leave the line open—which was just as well, since the jammed button at the other end would automatically channel any calls to his office. If anything had happened, he hoped Jameson had sense enough to go back to the cubicle and use the open line.

He saw the trimensional picture of his handsome wife sitting in the middle of his desk. It was a duplicate of the one back home. Her blonde hair shimmered softly under the indirect wall-lighting, even softening the faint calculating hardness of her brilliant eyes. He must have loved her greatly. How much did Laura love him, he wondered—or had loved him?

He tore his gaze away. For the time being, he tried hard to think of her as someone else's worry, someone who had a grim smile and a deadly pair of eyes set in a bland, handsome baby-face—and a cash register for a mind. The detective, Kyle, was taking good care of that problem.

He continued trying hard not to think about her as he studied the huge safe-vault behind his desk, but already there was a sickness in his throat and it was no use. His eyes wandered over to a liquor cabinet against the wall. The cabinet contained ice trays, bottles of all kinds of alcohol and mixers, and dozens of highball glasses. He poured out a stiff Scotch and gulped it down. When he looked up he noticed that the office door was open a crack. He was sure he had

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closed it. Or was he beginning to have the jitters? He crossed over and closed the door again, then went back to the safe-vault and peered into the eye slot of the retina lock.

He stood there several minutes before he realised nothing was happening! There were no buttons he could push or handles he could turn or pull. Presumably the moment his retina pattern checked with the one inside the lock, the safe would slide open. He again placed his eyes to the slot with the same result.

His apprehension returned again. He *was* Alister Conrad? His pattern had been checked and identified by the Security Police. No, the only thing that could be wrong was that the lock must be out of order.

He was just turning around when, out of the corner of his eye, he caught sight of the door—

It was open again.

He fumbled for the stungun in his pocket, but before he could get it out a black gun barrel appeared in the door crack. He felt a stun-wave hit him in the chest. He was falling backwards, down, down . . .

He was lying on his back, conscious of a terrible constricting pain in his chest. His eyes opened and he gazed at the softly lit walls of his office. The door was still partly open. With some difficulty he got to his feet and looked carefully around. Everything was the same. Nothing had been taken.

Wearily he sat down at his desk. For some reason someone had used a stungun on him. For something they wanted in the safe-vault? Had they been waiting for him to open it?

He glanced at his wrist. It was past midnight. He had been out for several hours. They were probably away and gone by now. And he would no doubt find Jameson slugged and tied up behind some building.

He brought the pint of Scotch over to his desk and killed a neat two-thirds of it in three gulps. As the liquor warmed his insides, the ache in his chest gradually subsided. He now found the sound-proof silence soothing. And now that he had an idea of what the game was, if not what it meant, he felt relaxed and confident.

On a sudden impulse he took out his wallet and thumbed through it for the retina identification of the man he was to kill.

It was gone!

His identification, heliojet license, credit card, even money, were all there. Everything but the slip of paper Val von Rachin had given him. *Somebody else now had Rene de Lamiter's retina pattern.*

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He sat there a long moment letting the implications of this discovery sink in. He wondered if Dr. von Rachin knew that a second party was also interested in de Lamiter. But for what reason could anyone be interested in Rene de Latimer other than the World Council and Unesco? In fact, who else knew the truth about de Lamiter except Val von Rachin and himself? Questions that he couldn't answer—and von Rachin had told him not to contact her under any circumstances until things were finished one way or the other.

While he was debating his next move, from out of nowhere a throaty feminine voice suddenly said, "Well, welcome back to the land-of-the-living!"

He jumped slightly. He had forgotten about the t-v being open. A good-looking brunette was smiling cockily at him through the screen. Blondes, redheads, and now brunettes—he was beginning to have quite a collection. He couldn't help smiling at the pleasant thought.

"What's the matter? No deep dark secrets any more? Or, by leaving your screen open, are you just giving the vulgar public a chance to peer into the sanctum-sanctorum of the sinister Mr. Conrad."

He didn't quite know what to say, so he let her ramble on, hoping for a cue.

"I've been calling your home all day, ever since reading about your miraculous reappearance and *darling* Laura's disappearance. Did she finally find out where *you* hid the body, or did you finally find where *she* hid the body? Oops—forgot we're on an open wire. Too many Manhattans without the cherries, I guess . . . I'm at another of those lush-lush Drake all-night parties. Suddenly dawned on me that you might be at your office working late and you'd come to rescue me."

She stopped to light a cigarette. It was the opening he had been waiting for. "Haven't you heard?"

"Heard what, Al?"

"That I brought back with me to the land-of-the-living a slight case of amnesia."

"I—" Her voice faltered an instant. "I didn't think it was that bad. You mean you don't even know who *I* am?"

"No."

She suddenly sobered and looked embarrassed. "I—I'm . . . sorry. I should have realised . . . it'll be like strangers, starting off again. That is, if you still want me."

Conrad tried to make his voice as warm as possible. "We'll untangle everything just as soon as we see each other. Some of the loose ends seem to be out here and I've got to look at them first—then I'll be in for you."

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This cheered her and she regained her old smile. "In case you're wondering who I am, my name is April Jordan. The address of Drake's is 13 East River Terrace." She impishly blew a cloud of smoke into the screen, then cut the connection.

He sat staring at the once-again open screen. April Jordan—a link with his past. What had she been? His secretary, mistress, what? Certainly no friend of the family's. From the unguarded way she had talked, whatever their relationship, she apparently assumed that it was no secret.

Despite her intoxicated chatter and her slurring mention of Laura, he was already liking April Jordan tremendously. Yet, there was still Laura and the nostalgia he seemed to have worked up for her. Artificial nostalgia, probably. Also the more immediate problem of the new and unforeseen complications beginning to surround Rene de Lamiter. And over-all was the psychological enigma of Dr. Val von Rachin with her ruthless mind and lush femininity. He began to wonder if he would ever forget the compulsions she had planted in his consciousness. His subconscious wouldn't let him—nor did he really want to forget, not until he had successfully completed his part.

With a start he realised that he was searching for clues and answers to problems that, as yet, he didn't fully comprehend.

He got up, straightened out his rumpled clothing and picked up the flash and stungun which had fallen to the floor. His t-v started ringing again the moment he cut the screen. After dousing the lights he pulled out the bunch of keys and carefully locked his office door. His footsteps didn't make a sound on the cushioned silence of the corridor.

Outside, the grounds and buildings were flooded with moonlight. The final traces of the rain squall had disappeared into the far south. Conrad decided that the most logical place to start looking for the caretaker Jameson would be in the vicinity of the cubicle.

The two buildings east of the cubicle revealed nothing. He crossed over and carefully checked the three buildings on the west side with the same results. Walking back to the entrance of the cubicle he spotted Jameson's huddled form lying against the northwest corner.

Conrad picked him up and carried him inside. His hands and feet had been hurriedly tied with an old sweater and towel. Faint groaning noises were coming through another sweater tied over his face and mouth. Quickly Conrad untied him and before he could say anything poured a slug of Old MacKinsey down his throat.

Jameson sputtered and coughed into full consciousness. "Mr. Conrad! You finally arrived . . . what happened?"

Conrad helped him sit up on the cot. "You tell me."

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"Why, you called me and I was talking to you when something knocked my foot off the t-v switch. Then the same thing—it was a stungun—that hit my foot caught me in the back. I don't even remember hitting the floor. When I came to I was tied up and smothering under something over my face."

Conrad handed him back the ring of keys. It was plain that Jameson didn't know what it was all about. "Is the revolving door in the south entrance always open?"

Jameson shifted his feet and looked embarrassed. "Well, Mr. Conrad, I know what you're going to say . . . an' I agree. What happened tonight was my fault, all right. You see, it gets kinda quiet inside here and—well, it gets on your nerves after awhile. So, lately, I've been usually leaving it unlocked until I've made my last rounds before turning in. That way, I can sorta duck out into the outside now and then for a little breather."

Conrad briefly mentioned what had happened in his office, omitting the slip of paper and what whoever-it-was had really been interested in.

"Hereafter, I suggest that you keep the south entrance locked at all times and that you require positive identification at all times before admitting anyone. Also, cut down on the whisky. You're *my* employee now. And make sure no one gives you orders but me. In the future, if anything out of the ordinary happens, call my home, and if I'm not there leave a message."

Suddenly Conrad remembered that, as he had entered the cubicle, he hadn't noticed the aircab waiting for him out front. He stepped over to the door. The front street was empty and the heliojet that had been parked up the street was gone as well.

He crossed over to the switchboard, unjammed his office screen, then opened the main t-v and had the operator give him the Red Bank Air Lift Taxi Service. After considerable inquiry he was connected with someone who said the aircab that had brought him over had waited and finally left. He was still on duty and would immediately be sent back over to pick him up.

Conrad hoped the cab pilot had still been waiting for him when whoever had owned the other jet had flown away.

Jameson retrieved his pipe and was trying to look more alert and efficient. "I'm sorry this happened, Mr. Conrad. And on your first trip out here since you got back!"

Conrad told him to forget it. "But get somebody out here as soon as you can to look at the retina lock on my safe-vault. Tonight it was fortunate that it broke down. Next time, however, I want it to open!"

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Conrad looked at his watch. Nearly 1:30. After telling Jameson to give him a call sometime in the afternoon he said goodnight and walked out of the dome.

Several minutes later, the cab sat down in front of the entrance and Conrad jumped in.

"What happened, mister? Thought you said you were gonna be back in a few minutes. Hell, I waited then dozed off for an hour—you still hadn't showed up so I beat it."

"Sorry," Conrad said, slipping him a couple of bills. "Here, this ought to cover it."

"Thanks! Any time, mister, any time."

They were in the air now and heading west into the shining moonlit night.

Conrad made his voice sound as casual as possible. "You didn't by any chance see someone get into that other jet parked up the street, did you?"

"No . . . wait a minute! I think I was just starting to doze when a dame, I think it was—yes, a dame, because she had her head covered in one of them flying hoods they're all wearing this season, walked out the entrance, there, and left in the jet."

Conrad gave a start when he heard the word "dame." Who would, or could, that be, he wondered? Laura?

"Why? Secretary or somebody walk out on you?"

Conrad ignored the question.

Red Bank loomed under them and they angled down to the airlift taxi platform. Conrad gave the pilot a generous tip, then went into the arrival-departure lounge where he paid the clerk the parking fee on *The Needle* 24 NXC. After locating his parking igloo he taxied *The Needle* out on its tail-jet, then gave the overhead jet rotors a heavy blast of fuel.

Ar 5,000 feet he decided to fly manually and, after checking Central Control, he climbed up to the first manual airlane at 8,000. Far in front and below him he could see Manhattan twinkling like a cluster of stars. He glanced at his wrist. He should be arriving at 13 East River Terrace shortly after two.

He began to realise that he was counting on April Jordan more than himself to unriddle what had happened, or was happening to him. Also he wondered how much of tonight he should tell her. So far, there were three women in his life and all of them quite capable of being deadly—even April. There was an atmosphere of purposefulness and power about her that had come over the t-v despite her intoxication. Her embarrassment had been almost too smoothly perfect.

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All the people he met, with the exception of old Jameson, seemed to possess power drives of one sort or another, all at complex cross-purposes. Or was it just himself who was out of step? Maybe he was just as dangerous as the rest. Birds of a feather . . .

And then there was this someone, a woman, who seemed to be after the same thing as he was. Or was she just trying to keep him from finding Rene de Lamiter? Whoever it was, and whatever she was after, she was doing an awfully good job of mind-reading—either that or tailing him.

Dr. von Rachin had put him up to all this—and Laura seemed to have vanished off the face of the earth. It could hardly be either of them. That seemed to leave the question mark dangling over April Jordan's head, at least for the moment.

As he neared the Hudson he cut his horizontal speed and started dropping down to the skyline level. Over Manhattan he cut his speed still further and joined the other heliojets darting above town like fireflies.

Above the East River he locked the ship into stationary, then dialled Central Control Information on the t-v and had them flash on a map of Manhattan. With it, an automatic tracer-marking appeared showing his position. When he cut out of Stationary it moved down the map with him as he headed for the place marked 13 East River Terrace, on Lower Manhattan.

V.

The Drake Mansion was situated on a landscaped terrace jutting far out over the East River. Red and green marker lights bordered a grass-covered landing stage. He landed silently between two other parked jets and climbed out.

His footsteps were muffled on a grass-carpeted pathway winding up the terrace to the house. Sounds of music and laughter drifted occasionally through the trees on the wind. Now and then, patches of water-reflected moonlight shot up through the shrubbery from the river below.

Beneath the retina lock on the door, in neat silver letters, was the name ALFRED DRAKE. He pressed the call button.

After a time, a small t-v screen lit up showing the handsome face of a middle-aged man with grey hair. "Hi-o, Al!" the man said enthusiastically.

The door snapped open into a long foyer lined with smoke-tinted mirrors. At the other end a tall, lean man with the same grey hair

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came striding down to meet him. From somewhere further on, came the pleasant sound of tinkling glasses and intoxicated chatter.

" Welcome !" the man said, sticking out his hand. " Say, old boy, could I have a word with you before April forces me to turn you over to her ?"

Conrad said yes, and was ushered into a small ante-room complete with leather-covered bar and stools. The door closed silently behind them, cutting off the laughter and hubbub. The man turned to Conrad, the jovial expression suddenly dropping from his face like a mask.

Conrad saw what was coming and tried to duck, but the man's left whipped up like a snake, catching him just under the point of the chin. Conrad felt his head snap back. Off balance, he tottered backwards into the bar stools, knocking them down like ten-pins.

" What'd you do with her, you filthy snake !"

Dazed, Conrad looked up at the man standing over him trembling with emotion.

" She said you were going to kill her and now she's disappeared ! You—"

Conrad tried to get up, but the man leaped down on him with the force of a jet. The wind went out of him in one agonizing gasp . . . blows were raining down on his face and head. He tried to protect himself, but both arms were entangled with the bar stools. Then the man had him by the throat.

" Where is she, damn you ! I'll get it out of you if I have to choke you to death !"

Conrad managed to gasp out something, but the fingers squeezed tighter around his throat. His breath was coming in gurgles now . . . he could hear a voice from far away. " I'll get a confession out of you if I have . . ." The words faded away into a purple haze . . .

Conrad was aware of a heavy engine pounding away somewhere in darkness. Then dully he realised that it was inside his head. As his consciousness slowly put itself together the pounding diminished and was replaced by a throbbing ache in his throat. He was still lying where he had fallen in a litter of bar stools. He managed to pick up himself and one stool before collapsing against the bar. Carefully he sat down and stared for a long time into the blue mirror behind the bar. The red strangle marks took on a purplish cast in the glass. There was a heavy bruise on his forehead, and blood was drying on his nose and mouth.

He glanced around the room. Everything was in order, including the door which was still closed. His attacker had vanished, apparently giving him up for dead. Conrad went behind the bar and turned on

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the water tap. He washed the blood from his face, then stuck his head under the cold stream of water. Slowly the cobwebs cleared away and he gave his hair a brisk rubdown.

So he had been trying to kill Laura? No wonder she had disappeared the moment he had put in an appearance. And now this character who had just throttled him thought that he had done it. Why hadn't both of them gone to the police? Or, now, why didn't Laura get in touch with the man and tell him she was alive and all right? Of course she had been missing barely over twenty-four hours . . . Well, he would find out all about that and Mr. Rough-Stuff soon enough. The man must've been interrupted or he would have finished killing him.

He finished drying his head, then combed his hair and straightened out his clothes. His watch said 2:50. He hadn't been out quite an hour this time. Before stepping from behind the bar he grabbed the first bottle and glass he saw and poured himself a long drink. He downed the contents before realising what he had poured. Coughing, he followed it with two water chasers. The bottle had contained absinthe. By the time he got the sticky-sweet licorice taste out of his mouth, the absinthe, with the help of his empty stomach, had already gone to work. He walked over to the door feeling lightheaded and reckless.

He stepped out into the mirror-lined foyer and walked toward the chatter and drunken laughter. The foyer right-angled into a hallway decorated with bizarre murals, which in turn opened into a vast amphitheatre filled with milling men and women. The only illumination came from the planetarium dome high overhead. The constellations set against the heavens of midnight-blue cast down a silvery glow, giving the room an unreal, dreamlike atmosphere. The floor area was covered with polar-white fur which, under the soft light, suggested growing grass bleached white.

Conrad spotted a long bar winding like a golden serpent against the far side of the room. April would probably be waiting for him there. He stepped down from the hallway onto the fur-covered floor. For a moment he thought the floor had vanished—walking across it was like walking on clouds of cotton.

As he slowly made his way through small clusters of people, he noticed several women staring at his rumpled suit. Fortunately he was not too conspicuous. Only the women were dressed formally. The men were dressed in clothes no more formal than his own, but minus the slept-in look his had.

Most of the women were of one type—a coat of paint on the outside and a cheque book on the inside. They even gave off the same per-

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fumed scent of sensuousness. Conrad eyed them coolly. Synthetic beauty for the most part deveolped at fabulous prices in the cosmetic super labs. Some had gilded eyelashes. Their clothes clung like second skins to their bodies.

Far on his left, immense French windows opened out into a miniature oriental garden. A weirdly exotic mood drifted in and out on an artificially created breeze.

The whole thing was a tinsel gag, Conrad decided. Underneath all the glitter, if you searched long enough, you found the tinsel. The empty tag-lines of conversation around him were the phony.

"Let's play Picnic in Purgatory!"

"You culture-vulture!"

"A highbrow, my dear, is a man who's found something more interesting than women."

"Just the same, if you were my husband I'd put poison in your mush!"

"And, my dear, if I were, I would eat it with pleasure!"

"A woman needs three husbands. One to support her, one to love her, and one to beat her."

"Well, I don't care how much money a man has, just as long as he has plenty."

"Yes, what good's happiness? You can't buy money with it."

". . . and she believes in the Two-Party system. One on Saturdays and one on Sundays."

Conrad felt like making a crack himself—to the effect that they all were a cast of characters unable to grasp anything more complicated than a highball.

An over-stuffed blonde with hydromatic hips and a plunging neckline low enough to make a baby cry smacked softly into him. She kissed him wetly. By the smell of her breath he could tell she was coming unglued at the seams.

When in Rome, he thought. "Pardon me while I pick up my eyeballs," he said, ducking out from under her lush arms and shoulders.

At last he was approaching the bar. He felt as though he had just taken a tour through a psychopathic ward.

The bar turned out to be a robot with personal mixing consoles between each stool. Behind it was a huge, dusky mirror reflecting the entire dome of stars overhead into one vast pattern of black and silver. The effect was spellbinding. The bar wasn't gold after all. Some hidden lighting source soft-focused a dim shade of sunlight onto its dull surface, giving it a dry, parched look psychologically designed to make anyone who stared at it long enough, thirsty.

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Slowly he became aware that he was staring at something else. She was sitting in one of the deserted serpentine curves of the bar. Something that might have been, "Well, I'm still waiting," came almost soundlessly from her smiling lips.

With a dreamlike slowness he moved in the direction of April Jordan. He paid no attention to a dim corner of his brain saying, "Careful now—don't forget you're dealing with super-charged people." Then he remembered that he was one himself, or supposed to be.

He stopped abruptly at the beginning of the bar curve. It was his first full-view glimpse of her. She radiated enough sex to shatter a glass eye at fifty paces. But her eyes were as cool as the inside of a wave, and just as green. The matching ice-green fabric of her dress, when she breathed, rippled like water. One side of the dress was slit halfway up her thigh. He could almost feel his ears growing pointed like a satyr's.

She crossed her lovely amber-dusted legs and said, "At least this part of it's like old times—keep the lady waiting . . ."

He noticed the semi-circle of empty glasses in front of her. "What are you drinking?"

"Fallen Angels, and I guess from now on . . . that's what they'll always be."

"Why Fallen Angles?"

"I've fallen, haven't I?"

Again he stared at the lush glamour of her figure. "You hardly look like an angel. Anyhow, fallen from what?"

Her glistening eyes stared into his. "Fallen from life . . . the life that ended tonight when you didn't know who I was or what . . . had been."

He sat down beside her and for the first time noticed a tear-stain against her cheeks. "I think I'll have a Fallen Angel, too."

She leaned over the mixing console, disregarding the manual controls, and whispered into a concealed phone. There was a faint hiss, then two dark lustreless drinks appeared.

The liquor suddenly meeting the absinthe caused a silent explosion inside his head. He steadied himself by shutting his eyes. His brain was spinning like a roulette wheel . . . he couldn't seem to stop it long enough to think of what to say.

"S'matter—did that drink break the angel's wings?" Her voice sounded like a sleepy thrush.

"Let's get the hell out of here." The power and roughness of his voice startled him. What was happening? Things weren't right . . . he wasn't attending to business. What business? What about April? He opened his eyes—April Jordan was gone.

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He lunged to his feet, knocking the row of glasses off the bar. To hell with April. What about the other thing? What was wrong with him? Couldn't he do a simple thing like get the records from his safe and find de Lamiter? Nobody else was supposed to know about de Lamiter—and with the exception of de Lamiter, no one could read his mind to find out about de Lamiter. Why were things suddenly growing so complicated? Or was it *he* that was growing complicated? And now April Jordan. He felt like making love to her and killing her—but she was gone.

He started walking away from the bar, then stopped. Coming towards him was April with a blue fur flung over one arm.

He grabbed her. "Why didn't you tell me you were only—" He realised that his fingers were digging into her bare shoulder—he dropped his hand. What was the matter with him anyway?

She was angry. Staring into her eyes was like staring into the muzzle of a gun. At that moment she looked deadly. "Amnesia or no amnesia—still up to your old habit of finger-printing me where it will show the most!" She stood there swaying slightly, her face a thundercloud—then it broke and rain trickled down from the corners of her eyes.

When he saw this, his heart turned upside-down.

Her face softened. "Oh, don't mind me . . . I'm just hanging my tears out to dry." She turned away from him. "Oh, the hell with it all!"

He said softly, "The hell with what all?"

"With everything. And you."

She faced him for a moment, then stalked off.

As if in a dream he found himself catching up with her, whirling her around and taking her in his arms. He kissed her and could almost feel his heart stand on its head.

Her breath was hot on his neck. "I guess this was the last one . . . now my bridges are gone—I've watched them all burn . . ." She slowly went limp in his arms. "I'm tired of getting drunk and talking like this, like the rest of the characters around here." She disengaged herself, shook her hair, then stood quietly by his side.

They were standing on the steps leading down into the sunken garden. The cold early-morning air cleared his head somewhat. He realised that he had to catch himself before he ran completely away from everything, taking her with him.

He placed his hand on the side of her cheek. "Let's go home. We can always start over again another night."

The first faint flush of dawn was dimming the stars. She took him by the hand and led him down through the garden. He was finding it difficult to focus his mind on anything but the moment . . . The

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laughter and music faded into the morning breeze as they went under a half-moon bridge and down the terrace steps.

By the time they reached the landing stage the stars were going out one by one as the curtain of dawn lifted higher and higher in the east. And before he knew it he was standing beside a heliojet that wasn't his.

He glanced hurriedly around the stage still half-full of jets. "What happened to my *Needle*?"

"*Needle*? Oh—thought the news said Laura had run off with it. Didn't know you had another." She looked alcoholically confused. Her voice was faint. "Don't leave me . . . your jet's probably way over on the other side some place."

He helped her open the door, then climbed in after her. The timeless feeling had left him and slowly the odd violence of the night before began to awaken him.

"April—"

"Yes, Al," she whispered, bending down, fumbling with the heater under the seat.

He looked away from her up into the blue of the sky. "Why did I . . . want to kill my wife?"

She leaned weakly against the dash. "Then you *did* do it. But . . . why?"

"That's what somebody else accused me of just after I came in last night. Only he didn't ask why. Instead, I think he tried to murder me." Unconsciously he fingered the bruises on his throat.

She noticed them. "What—happened?"

Quietly, as waves of heat radiated up through the cabin, he told her.

She was still staring at his throat when he finished. "That was her brother who tried to do that. He knew you were coming because he walked in on me while I was videoing you. Still, why should either one of them think you wanted to kill her? By killing her you would lose everything." Her voice suddenly softened. "Oh, Al, can't you remember anything?"

He shook his head.

"One of the reasons you married her was for her fortune. You didn't learn until afterwards that it was controlled by her brother. And Roderik Niles hated you. The moment anything happened to her you would lose everything—the use of the money, Sleep-Tanks, everything! All of it would come under his control."

Conrad was puzzled. "But why—without proof . . .?"

"Because he knew he could get away with it, I suppose. After all, next to Drake himself he's one of the most powerful men in Trans-Lunar Spaceways—and in the Western Hemisphere."

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She stared, unseeing out into the cold morning light. " I wonder what did happen to Laura ?"

He looked at the wan beauty of her face under the dark circles of dissipation around her eyes. And, for a moment, he decided he didn't care what had happened to Laura. He was glad something had. He probably wouldn't be here staring at April if it hadn't.

" April, what are you to me ?"

" You mean what was I ? Your girl Friday, your dog to kick when things weren't going well, and towards the end—the woman you almost fell in love with." She closed her eyes and said almost in a whisper, " And now I suppose I'm yesterday's hangover."

There was silence for a time and he was glad. He was slowly beginning to feel that if there was anyone he could count on it was April. Even von Rachin seemed very dim in his mind. He could tell April everything.

He looked over at her—her eyes were still closed and her head was nodding. There was a slight trace of moisture at the corner of each eye.

Very calmly and very evenly he said, " April, how do you know I'm not in love with you now ?"

She jerked awake with a start. " Must've dreamed you said something . . . we'll never get home at this rate." She yawned. " There's some benzo-strychnine tablets in the locker behind you."

Conrad twisted around and pulled open the locker. Something fell to the floor. His heart froze. Lying there was a black flying hood and cloak. And sticking out of one pocket was the butt of a stungun. He tore his eyes away from the floor and reached up for the bottle. He handed it to her silently, then stuffed the hood and cloak back into the locker.

She handed him two pills and he almost dropped them. Hell, what was he so nervous about ? Hadn't the aircab pilot said everybody this season was wearing flying hoods ? And since she played around with highpowered characters like himself and the Drakes, why shouldn't she carry a stungun ?

She lifted the jet into the air and pointed it north. The benzo-strychnine finally took effect and his brain stopped spinning. All the cobwebs were suddenly gone. He felt in full command of his faculties for the first time since he had met her. He didn't glance at her. She would be just as alert as he, and might notice his changed expression and manner. He looked out the window, away from her. Somehow he couldn't rationalize away his suspicions. He was almost sure they were twisting his face with contempt that he wouldn't be able to hide.

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Once her green eyes, now fully awake, caught his. Then she smiled and they softened into long sensuous slits. Was it his over-stimulated imagination or, for a moment, had he caught something cold and deadly within them? She continued to be silent the rest of the way uptown. The sun, looking like a bloodshot eye, was beginning to peer over the eastern horizon when they landed on Xanadu, a swank apartment tower. She taxied the jet into a parking igloo, then after cutting the throttles, sat waiting for Conrad to get out.

"I'm not coming in with you." After almost falling in love with her, the casualness of his voice surprised him.

Her voice sounded cold and distant. "Well, this is where I came in; now I'll go out again."

She climbed out and he followed her over to the elevator. At the entrance she pressed a button, then turned and stared up into his face.

"You know where I live and, as in the past, my door will always be open to you . . . Right now, I'm a little weary of scenes." The entrance slid open behind her and she vanished into the elevator.

He stood staring at the spot where she had been standing. His emotions twisted into a strange knot of suspicion and trustfulness. She, if anyone, could tip him back into his proper background . . . and he had just cut her down to something she might not be. Simultaneously, though, he wanted to play the rest of the part alone without making it any more complicated. What was he going to do about his wife's brother, Roderik Niles, about Laura, Rene de Lamiter, Dr. von Rachin, and—sometime—April?

He walked along the entrance until he found a call box. After punching for a cab he leaned against the wall and let the watery sunshine soak into his face and rumpled clothing, a puzzled and unhappy man in an unhappy, strange and dangerous world.

VI.

He got out of the aircab at 13 East River Terrace. It was just 7:00 by his watch when he climbed into his own jet and headed back uptown towards Sky Terrace. He had decided to forget about the human elements involved and stick to his original purpose. Val von Rachin's voice and eyes were still lurking somewhere back in his mind—she was still with him.

With the controls on manual he slowly cruised up Sixth Avenue until he spotted Sky Terrace and the brilliant 45 painted on his roof. He dropped down, being careful to set the wheels on the landing plates, and the mooring lines automatically shot up and snaked around

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the landing gear. He got out and walked down the floating stairway along the side of the house.

The benzo-strychnine had over-reacted, leaving him with a mild state of hypertension. He decided to take a sedative and sleep until noon. Then he would call Detective Kyle and Sleep-Tanks. The safe-vault retina lock should be fixed by evening. Then, if necessary, he would search through his private records all night, until he found the location of de Lamiter. Whether or not he could find it without de Lamiter's retina pattern, he didn't know.

He put his eye to the retina lock next to his door and waited for it to click open. Nothing happened . . . Several more seconds went by, then he gave the door a heavy kick. It might as well have been a stone wall—the door didn't budge.

For a moment he wondered if somebody was playing tricks on him. First the safe-vault retina lock and now this one. Why would anyone want to lock him out of his own house? Or, for that matter, his safe-vault? Not his unknown lady at Sleep-Tanks, surely. It was only because of the retina-lock breakdown there that she had been thwarted and fled, so the cab-pilot said. Again, he found himself wondering if it could have been April. But that was one thing he didn't like to think about.

He climbed back up the stairway and got into *The Needle*. After some difficulty he finally managed to t-v a locksmith who was up and in his shop and willing to come over to 45 Sky Terrace.

Fifteen minutes later, the man landed carefully on Conrad's front lawn and walked out with a bag of tools in each hand.

The lock mechanism came out easily and after connecting test meters to the mechanism and lead-in wires in the side of the door, he checked the complete circuit with a pair of electrode points. Then he examined the two retina cells sealed with quartz into the concrete wall siding.

He disconnected his instruments, bolted the lock mechanism back into the wall and wrote out a bill and handed it to Conrad.

He carefully folded the money Conrad paid him into his wallet, then stared hard at the retina eye-piece. "Mister, are you sure you know who you are? Because I don't think you're Alister Conrad. There's nothing wrong eith that lock, but there's something wrong with your eyes—and you better go to Central Identification and find out what's happened." He turned around, walked back to his jet and disappeared into the sky.

Conrad's mind went numb as he gazed at the door that wouldn't open. What little self-confidence he had vanished. He couldn't be sure of anything any more, even his sanity. If he wasn't Alister Conrad, who was he? But perhaps this, like everything else, was just another

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manifestation of his memory-loss. Something serious, then, had happened either to his eyes or mind, or maybe both. But what? How should he go about finding out? Check with Central Identification? And if he did—then what? What would Dr. Val von Rachin and the authorities do if they learned that he actually was somebody else impersonating Alister Conrad?

He began to have the feeling that he was mixed up in something much more deadly than just the loss of his identity-memory. It was too late to back out now. If he turned himself over to the authorities they or he might never find out what had really happened to him. It occurred to him, too, that his imagination might be over-dramatizing everything. Perhaps something had happened to the retina pattern of his eyes, some accident that he was unaware of. But if he checked with any doctor what was to prevent the doctor from checking with whatever was on file at Central Identification?

First he had to find somebody he could trust to help him find the right doctor. April was out. That left only the detective as a possibility. He went up to the jet and called Kyle. The tape secretary answered, saying that he was out for the day. Conrad switched off without leaving a message. It was stuffy inside *The Needle* and he began to wonder if there wasn't some other way of getting inside the house. His nerves were exhausted and the thought of coming in contact with anyone terrified him. And he didn't want to wait all day for Kyle inside the jet.

There was a dream . . . suddenly he remembered the nightmare he had had about somebody kidnapping him through the French windows.

He climbed out of the jet and peered over the rear edge of the roof. It was over fifteen feet to the balcony floor. He searched through *The Needle* for something to make a rope. All he found were several rolls of soft fuel wire. He unwound one roll and discovered that it was approximately eight feet in length.

Then he pushed the jet over to the roof edge and locked the parking brakes. He wrapped one end of the wire firmly around the landing-gear strut and dangled the other end over the roof. After tearing his handkerchief in two and wrapping the pieces around his hands, he lowered himself over the edge, grasped the wire and slid down as slowly as he could. The handkerchief came loose and he slipped with a terrible burning sensation across his palms. He let go and hit the balcony with a stunning jar.

When his wind returned he got up and looked through the open French windows into the interior of his house. He was halfway over the threshold when a shrill jangle went off in what sounded like every

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room. Quickly he glanced around the window casements and spotted what looked like four electric eyes. A burglar alarm.

He rushed in and searched for the shut-off. He finally found it next to the extension t-v screen in his bedroom. But too late. A tiny sign was flashing, CALL ACKNOWLEDGED PATROL ON WAY.

He tried to think fast. Could he risk a chance with the police by making up some excuse about the alarm being defective or an accident? Why not? He could tell them he came home and forgot to turn it off before going out on the sun-deck. But first he would have to get to the roof and get that length of wire into the jet.

He carefully opened the front door and pushed it back against the wall, then raced out and up the steps to the jet. He hauled up the wire, threw it into the ship, then pushed it back to the mooring cables and ran back down the stairs.

The door was closed.

With a sinking sensation Conrad tried it to make sure. Apparently it was hung to close automatically in the event it was left open by accident. His heart pounding, he climbed back to the roof, wondering if there was time to repeat his entering process.

There wasn't.

Already two patrol jets were coming up from the south and two more were dropping down from the north.

He dived into *The Needle* and flicked the tailpipe jet on full blast. He gunned the rotors just enough to jump the ship over the roof parapet, then he dived straight down the building wall into the thirty story canyon below. The airspeed crept up to 300, then to the 400 mark before he switched the blast from the tailpipe to the rotors. He barely tilted the rotors up in time to clear the debris-littered street level. He let out his breath and again turned on the tailpipe full blast.

He streaked west on what had once been Fifty-Second Street, then did a vertical bank up the first avenue he came to, almost throwing himself into the nearest buildings. It was Madison he was on and he followed it slowly into the Eighties before looking up and backwards for any sign of the Police Patrol. There wasn't a trace, so he cut down a side street into the ruins of Central Park.

The surroundings looked familiar—he suddenly realised that this was the spot he had come upon the bar called The Last Mile and his first introduction again with civilization. Something far down in his mind began to bother him—something about a little character who looked like a stuffed squirrel—*Hypo Ned.* Ned had been in his nightmare that first night back at the house. Ned had taken him down somewhere and done something to his eyes—

Had that been a nightmare?

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But how had Ned got in without setting off the alarm? The whole thing was implausible. What possible connection could Hypo Ned have with anything that was happening? Yet, Ned was the first person he had met who had shown any interest in him. Why?

He meant to find out.

Up the street to his right was The Last Mile. The broken neon sign dangled crookedly from the single metal rod. There was no sign of life either around it or in the street. Like rats everyone down here came out only at night, Conrad thought. He wondered if his jet would be safe where it was. There was too strong a chance, he decided, that it might be picked up by the police—or the underworld, if they too were looking for him.

He shot *The Needle* back up to the sky level and cruised further downtown until he spotted a parking stage. From there he took a cab back down to The Last Mile, checking with the pilot to make sure pickup service extended to all lower level sections.

The thin autumn sun beat down palely on the front window of the bar and grill, making the entire facade seem much more sordid and dingy than it really was. He didn't quite know exactly what he was going to say to the bartender Moose, or whatever his name was—or for that matter, anyone else who might be in there. This time, though, he at least didn't look like a bum and he had an unlimited credit card that could be verified. That should be some help in getting a lead on Hypo Ned.

He opened the door and stepped through. For a moment the dimness blinded him. Then a voice at his elbow said, "Why, if it isn't my friend Mr. Conrad."

A hand reached out and touched his arm. "This way, I've been expecting you."

Conrad squinted into the dimness and he looked down to see Hypo Ned. Anger flashed through him, everybody seemed to know exactly what was going on and what he was doing but himself. He controlled his emotions and followed Ned over to a corner table where he got his first look at him. He had the eyes of a hawk and talonlike hands to match. His body still looked like that of a squirrel.

Ned was smiling at him as he sat down. The room was empty, even the bartender was missing.

"That's all right, Mr. Conrad, nobody's here. Moose doesn't open the Mile until evening. Our schedules seemed to have gotten a little crossed. I called on you last evening with the gadget to make the permanent retina transfer, but you weren't at home."

So it hadn't been a nightmare after all! "How did you get in without setting off the alarm?"

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"Why, with the power disrupter, of course. Just as my orders told me to do."

Excitement got the better of Conrad. He whipped out the stungun from his pocket and pointed it squarely at Ned's breastbone. "Whose orders?"

Ned didn't bat an eye. "Why, your own orders, Mr. Conrad."

That shocked him. He let the gun clatter to the table. "*My* orders!"

Ned smiled. "You told me you wouldn't remember anything!"

Conrad tried to make sense out of that. Was he playing some deadly game with himself? Apparently this had all happened before his identity-loss.

"What about this retina business? How did you know I'd come looking for you at The Last Mile when I discovered my pattern wouldn't open anything?"

"Because it stood to reason that you would attempt to find me before the authorities or somebody caught on to the fact that your retina pattern wasn't all it should be."

"Once I left the house, how was I to get back in to be there when you called again last night?"

"That was something not planned for. The first impression of the pattern should have lasted thirty hours or longer. But you explained that there might be an uncertainty factor when you gave me the device."

"Why wasn't all this explained to me when you first picked me up, or some indication made later that night when you drugged me? I thought it was all part of a nightmare."

Ned's sharp eyes looked straight into his. "For you, some of it was. The drug sometimes brings on mild delirium. Part of my instructions were to explain as little as possible to you. That was why the pose of acting like a bum while waiting around to make first contact with you. When in Rome, you know."

Conrad picked up the stungun and idly examined it. "Suppose I told you that I didn't believe a word you said and that I've suddenly decided I don't want my retina pattern put back or further tampered with?"

The little man gave a faint sigh and smiled. "You also prepared me for that question too. And told me exactly what to do in case it came up or you tried to change your mind—"

With no indication other than a blur of speed, both the man's hands came up and down, one knocking the gun on the floor, the other smashing down onto his upper arm. Before it struck, Conrad caught the metallic flash of a hypodermic strapped to the palm of Ned's hand. The needle grazed his arm bone with a scraping sensation that

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sickened him. Then icy fire tingled through his body. Somehow he stayed propped up in his chair, and with paralyzed eyes watched Ned pick up a black bag from somewhere and take out a glittering object resembling a combination crystal ball and binoculars. The contraption was carefully fitted to his eyes, then strapped to his head. He stared into a bubbling mass of red lines. After awhile the lines stopped wiggling and it occurred to him that now his pattern was the same as that inside the crystal ball.

The device was removed and put back in the bag. Still paralyzed, he watched Ned go into a t-v booth and make a call. Then Ned returned to his black bag and took out another hypo.

Conrad felt a soothing liquid flow through the veins in his right arm. He suddenly went completely limp. Ned had to catch him before his head crashed into the table. He was as weak as a baby, and could do nothing but make gurgling noises in his throat. After long minutes Ned picked him up and carried him out into a waiting heliojet.

"My friend's had a little too much to drink," he told the pilot, "but he'll be all right by the time he gets home. I'll just pop a couple of benzos into his mouth."

Conrad almost choked on the tablets, but managed to get them down.

"Forty-five Sky Terrace, is the address," Ned was saying, "and here's an extra tip in case my friend messes up the cab."

"Goodbye, Mr. Conrad. Don't have too big a hangover." Ned laughed and vigorously shook his hand.

To be continued

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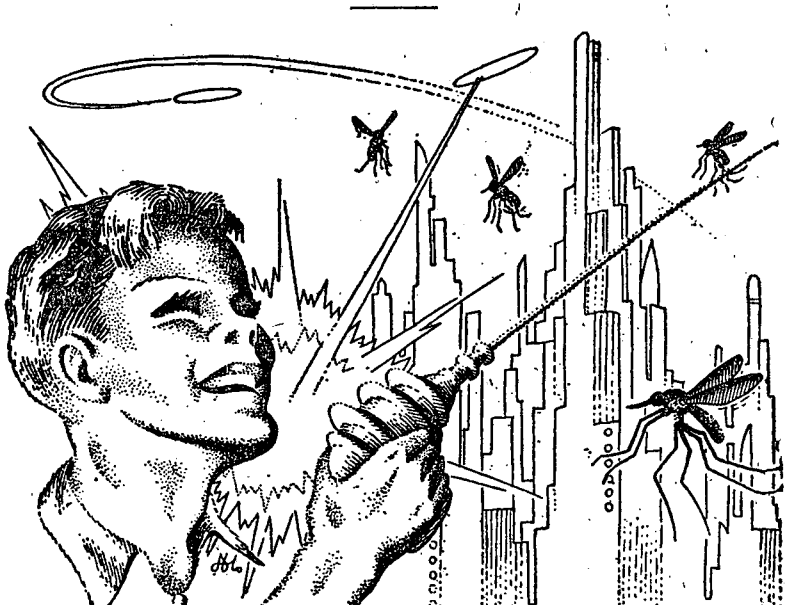
Many fascinating stories have been written about the first contact of an alien culture with that of Earth, but seldom has one embodied so much humour as the following gem of an idea. In fact, the lighter side of science fiction has never been fully exploited —we are endeavouring to remedy that fault in future issues.

RECONNAISSANCE

By P. W. Cutler

Illustrated by HUNTER



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The valley, nestling in the fold of tree-clad hills, shimmered in the afternoon heat, which vaguely distorted the cream and white farmhouses dotting its slopes. Winding lazily down to the valley bottom and disappearing into the blue haze of distance ran the ribbon of road that was the main contact with the outside world—a thin stream of white dust from a departing car marking the configurations of the terrain.

Idly swinging on the gateway in front of his father's farmhouse, ten-year old Tim watched the car carrying his family disappear from view behind a spur in the hillside, the rhythmic creak of the gate already overlaying his mother's final admonitions to be a good boy while they were gone to town and not go too far from the house.

The creak of the gate impinged more and more upon his fertile imagination, becoming, for the moment, the creak of loading gear hoisting cargoes aboard a spaceship shortly to blast for Mars. The quiet valley underwent a rapid change as he peopled it with all the hurly-burly of a space port as depicted in one of his comics, the afternoon mail plane which chanced to pass over at that moment, miraculously turning into a two-man flier of the Space Guard patrolling the secret base of Captain Sword.

His thoughts skidded to a stop and the valley resumed its normal appearance. Might as well play Space Patrol with the other boys—he could go up to the old barn on the crest of the hill and set off the emergency signal which would bring the rest of the patrol to the rescue. Rapidly he made his plans, then dropped off the gate and ran indoors, scooping up a handful of comics from the settee in the living room and stuffing them into his zippered shirt. Opening the door of his toy cupboard he lovingly took out his disintegrator gun—a two-hundred shot water pistol with a range of thirty feet—buckled the holster round his waist, and went to the tap in the out-house where he filled the weapon to maximum capacity. Placing it in its holster, he hefted it out a couple of times to make sure his lightning draw would not be impeded, then, as Timothy Bennett, he tiptoed quickly to the door.

On the verandah outside all traces of Timothy Bennett disappeared as he became Buck Lancing of the Space Patrol—now on a secret mission, and having just escaped the clutches of the mysterious invaders from Outer Space, bent on subjugating Earth. Crouching low, he doubled across the gravelled path, taking temporary refuge behind a clump of evergreens while he made a quick survey of his escape routes.

He was about to make his dash for freedom when he saw one of the invader's midget spy planes zooming towards him (back in his own time and space it was a lowly mosquito). With a deft movement he

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flung himself flat, the disintegrator gun springing into his hand before he hit the ground. A swift snap-shot and the enemy raider went down, but probably not before he had radioed vital information back to his base. Pounding out of the garden Tim ran for the sheltering trees nearby, enemy raiders already beginning to pick up his trail.

Heat beams flickered around him as he zigzagged beneath overhanging branches, turning occasionally to loose a destructive beam at his attackers. As the pursuit closed in he took a mighty leap at a low branch and swung himself into the concealing foliage of a friendly oak tree, casually picking off the midget fliers as they droned unsuspectingly past beneath him.

Pursuit temporarily over, he sat and planned his next move. Headquarters ship of the enemy would obviously be in the copse just over the next ridge—if he could creep up on them unawares he could probably get inside and, given the right opportunities, kill the entire crew and capture the vessel for Captain Sword, now somewhere out in space fighting a last-ditch stand against the Grand Fleet of the invaders.

Satisfied with his decision, Buck dropped from his precarious perch and crept through the undergrowth, occasionally peering from behind a tree to take a snapshot at a robot eye which was shadowing him. As he neared the crest of the ridge he became doubly cautious—the roar of enemy ships taking off and landing thundering in his ears. One was about to land now, Buck judged, as a rushing roar of noise battered on his eardrums, followed by a wave of heat which knocked him flat on his back. Picking himself up he felt a momentary twinge of panic as little tongues of fire flickered through the dry tree-tops, but the do-or-die courage of Buck Lancing came to the fore, and he pushed on—probably Captain Sword had returned and dropped an atom bomb on the alien nest.

Over the ridge Tim cautiously parted some still-smouldering bushes and stared out at the enemy ship, its venturis still redhot from braking, wisps of vapour still rising from the scorched earth surrounding it. Wriggling further into cover for protection he watched breathlessly as a round section of the hull opened and three figures dropped easily to the ground. Tim was more than a little disappointed to find that they were apparently normal Earthmen—but that could be part of the enemy's cunning, to assume the guise of human beings. However, they had made a mistake on the matter of uniforms, which didn't conform to those of the Space Patrol or any of the known enemies Earth was at present fighting—better watch for an opportunity to outwit them. He settled himself more comfortably to watch.

The invaders didn't seem at all interested in their surroundings, and judging from their many gesticulations, some form of argument

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was going on, although no sound of conversation reached Buck's ears. Probably telepathic he thought.

"This is sheer madness, Captain" We have no business landing while on routine patrol, and, unless we can get away safely there will be some awkward questions back at Base."

"Nald's right, Captain. We've exceeded our orders, and probably we've been plotted in on hundreds of tracking-screens—we can expect trouble at any moment. Let's get back into space while there is still time."

"Patience, Quorro, and you too, Nald. I think we can learn a lot about the recent developments on this world with a little careful exploration—and the rewards will be high. Tentatively, this planet is still classed as Phase Three, which means no space travel—and if they haven't got ships then they haven't the instruments for plotting interplanetary craft—"

"—but, sir, when we cruised over the continent to the west some kind of guided missile was fired at us—"

"No, I don't think it was. Remember, it curved back to earth again. They are in the experimental stage, probably early-type reaction motors, chemically fuelled, and that was probably an experimental rocket fired for testing purposes. If we had been spotted coming in, I think we should have been investigated before this—"

"But, sir, they have atomics, we know that."

"Yes, Nald, we know that. And that's what I want to find out about. Just how far advanced in factual and theoretical atomics have they become—whether they are about to pass into Phase Four. If we can interrogate one or two of the inhabitants, we might be able to fill in sufficient data to satisfy base. This is a quiet spot we have landed in, we should be able to—"

"Captain! There's something or somebody over there in that clump of bushes!"

"Where?"

"To the right of those two trees. I can't contact its mind at all—its either an animal or a young human, non-telepathic."

"Yes—I've got him. I can just touch his mind—its a young male—but I cannot understand his thoughts. Nald! Quorro! I think this is an opportunity. We'll use the translator on him and we'll probably get enough minor information to build up a picture of just what these people are like technologically. But, don't frighten the boy—let me handle him."

Tim was suddenly aware of the fact that the aliens were no longer silently arguing, but were walking slowly towards his hideout. No

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time now to raise the rest of the Space Patrol—he'd have to outwit them on his own. Taking a deep breath, he rose to his feet and went to meet the strangers. A few yards from the smiling leader of the three invaders he halted, feet wide apart, hand resting lightly upon the butt of his disintegrator.

"How did you get through the Patrol?" he asked loudly, a stern expression upon his face.

From a small oblong box strapped to the man's chest a metallic squawk came. "Patrol?" the box said echoed. "We didn't think—we didn't see any patrol."

"I bet they saw you alright," said Buck. "Nothing misses the patrol. I can't think why they didn't blast you." He hefted his gun a little further from its holster.

The box appeared to squawk again. "I expect they knew we came in peace," it said after a moment's pause. "We are on reconnaissance, and want to find out a few things about your civilisation."

"What things?" queried Buck.

"Well—how many there are of you—what state of civilisation you have reached—how far advanced you are—how—"

"You're a spy," interjected Buck, simply.

"No—no!" the translator hastily reassured.

"An advance patrol sent to test our defences," continued Buck easily.

"No, not at all—that is—"

"Can I look over the ship?" Buck's personality was temporarily submerged as Tim's mind went off at a tangent. If they were *real* aliens—but, no, they were probably crew members from a high altitude rocket test. One of his better quality magazines had hinted that such tests were certain to be made soon, if they had not already been accomplished. The Buck Lancing part of his mind took over as the leader replied to his question through the medium of the translator box.

"Why,—uh—yes, if you would like that." He led the way to the lock, followed by the boy and then his two companions.

As they were about to enter Buck stopped and sagely asked "Is this an Eftee-el ship?" squinting wisely up at the tall stranger by his side.

"Eftee-el? I'm afraid I don't . . ."

"You know, faster than light," Buck interjected, with an airy wave of one hand.

"Faster than—why, no. This is frequency powered. It is only a small ship for routine patrol work," the voice-from-the-box answered.

"Then you must have a parent ship standing by somewhere, or a Fleet?" queried the irrepressible Tim, as he began to scramble into

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the opening. The Captain cast a desparate look at his colleagues as he helped the boy over the metal rim of the lock.

" *What sort of civilisation have we run into now ?*"

Tim was not very impressed by his tour of the small ship. He saw their tiny quarters, the main engine room and finally the control room almost totally lacking in mechanical mysteries. The only item that attracted his attention was the Manual Astrogator, as it was explained, a screen upon which pin-points of light representing the planets of the Solar System in their orbits wheeled and gyrated as the Captain spun the dials.

" This enables us to pre-select a course," he explained through the translator. " From the position of the dots we can choose a course, leave it set up on the screen, and in an emergency blast off at a moment's notice. The machine feeds the plot into a computor which in turn relays it to the control centre. The ship is then automatically kept on that set course." He wasn't sure whether this registered in the boy's mind and was considerably taken aback when Tim remarked, " Still, as the course is set by you their could be a mistake. It should be set automatically as well as relayed automatically—then there could be no margin for error."

" Machines can go wrong," thoughtlessly remarked the Captain.

" Then the relaying would be wrong," argued Tim, " and you'd still be off course." He paused. " Anyhow," he concluded, " *our* machines don't go wrong." With which pithy remark he turned and led the way out of the ship feeling rather pleased with himself and the way in which he had handled the situation.

Bluff, he thought. That was it—bluff. Just as Commodore Vance of the Interstellar Guard had bluffed his way into the hiding place of van der Loon on the Black Nebulae.

" Tell me," said the Captain, interrupting Tim's train of thought, " do all young men on this planet carry weapons ?"

" Oh—most of us," replied Tim cautiously, and patted his holster. " This is a disintegrator gun."

" Mind if I have a look at it ?" the Captain said, stepping forward. " You can have mine in exchange," the man persuaded as he saw the dubious look on the boy's face. Tim hesitated then handed over his toy receiving in exchange a heavy Service blaster.

The Captain bent forward. " This is the firing button," he explained " and this catch operates the width of the beam—tight—normal—wide. Simple, isn't it ?"

Tim hefted the weapon in his hand. It fitted fairly well into his palm although the butt was a trifle large. He felt a pleasurable thrill

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go through him and had a strong desire to just press the firing stud and see what happened.

"Let me try your gun out," said the Captain after looking perplexedly at it for a few moments. "We'll pick that tree over there as a target," pointing to a young beech at the edge of the copse and raised Tim's weapon to shoulder level.

"Wait a minute," yelled Tim, jumping into the line of fire. His small brain was racing with all the possibilities of this unexpected situation. If the man pulled the trigger and only a stream of water came out his bluff would be called. "We'll do it properly," he suggested. "Both with holstered guns and one of your men can give the signal—then we fire."

He produced a grubby square of once-white linen, extracted three soiled sausages, a marble, and a small piece of putty, and handed it to Nald.

"Now," said Tim, "when you drop the handkerchief we draw, aim, and fire." Nald took the piece of material and moved away a few paces while the Captain placed Tim's gun in his holster.

Tim hefted the unfamiliar weapon again, advanced the catch to wide beam, fitted it into his holster and hitched his belt more comfortably on to his thigh. The gun was a little large, the butt protruding quite a bit, which was probably all to the good he thought. They stood ready, hands at their sides. Slowly Nald raised the handkerchief aloft and then released his hold.

The Captain's hand flashed down and his gun came up but even as his fingers curled round the unfamiliar trigger there came a blast of flame and the beech tree crumpled to the ground rent by the force of the explosion from Tim's gun. The boy stared in fascination. He hadn't bargained for anything so spectacular. There was a strangled sound from the Captain.

"How did you learn to draw like that?" he asked, a note of incredulity coming from the box on his chest.

Tim endeavoured to be nonchalant. "Oh, I practice quite a bit," he remarked carelessly. Which was something of an understatement considering the amount of studious time he had put in at it, being able to whip his gun out faster than any of his friends, and although the weapon he had handled was unknown to him it had still leapt into his hand with easy familiarity.

"Could I have my gun back now?" he asked, holding out his hand.

Wordlessly the alien handed over the de luxe zap gun and accepted his own weapon in return. "I wonder if you would mind remaining here a moment while my crew and I have a conference?"

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"Go ahead," replied Tim with a wave of his hand, and pulling a couple of comics from his shirt he spread-eagled himself face downwards on the grass and began to read.

"*Well ?*"

"I said we should not have landed," burst from Nald, "I knew it was dangerous."

"**We have been in no danger yet," Quorro reminded him, "but I think we should decide on a course of action. As I see it, sir, we can either stay with the boy and try to find out more concerning the conditions on the planet from him, or we can leave and find someone else perhaps near a small township.**"

"*I have no desire to interview groups—we may arouse suspicion, even violence, and I do not want to harm anyone. In any case, the fewer people who see us the better. I think we had better stay with the boy and learn what we can. With the right handling he should be able to supply us with most of the information we require.*"

"But what is the 'right handling?' You saw how he handled your blaster. He is quite capable of killing us all."

"*I am beginning to wonder why you volunteered for this assignment. You're far too nervous. Until we have positive evidence that the culture of this planet is as advanced as the boy indicates we will stay with him. You keep a special watch on him for any hostile move, but I don't think we have anything to worry about—this is probably all a game to him.*"

They returned to Tim's recumbent form. The boy had been totally absorbed in a comic and looked up with a start as their shadows fell across the open pages. He rose to his feet.

"Have you any more books like this ?" the Captain's voice asked as he indicated the coloured papers in Tim's hand.

"Of course," replied the boy, and dug into his shirt to produce five or six more. He handed them to the three men watching interestedly as the comics were passed from hand to hand. It was the first time he had seen adults display any active interest in his reading matter, except for occasional reprimands from his father for reading such trash. As they became thoroughly absorbed in the pictures Tim became bored and wandered over to the open lock of the ship.

A glance over his shoulder told him that they had forgotten his existence for the time being. All three were sitting on the grass intently scanning the comics.

He clambered into the lock and made his way to the control room. It was fascinating the way the little points of light swirled and danced

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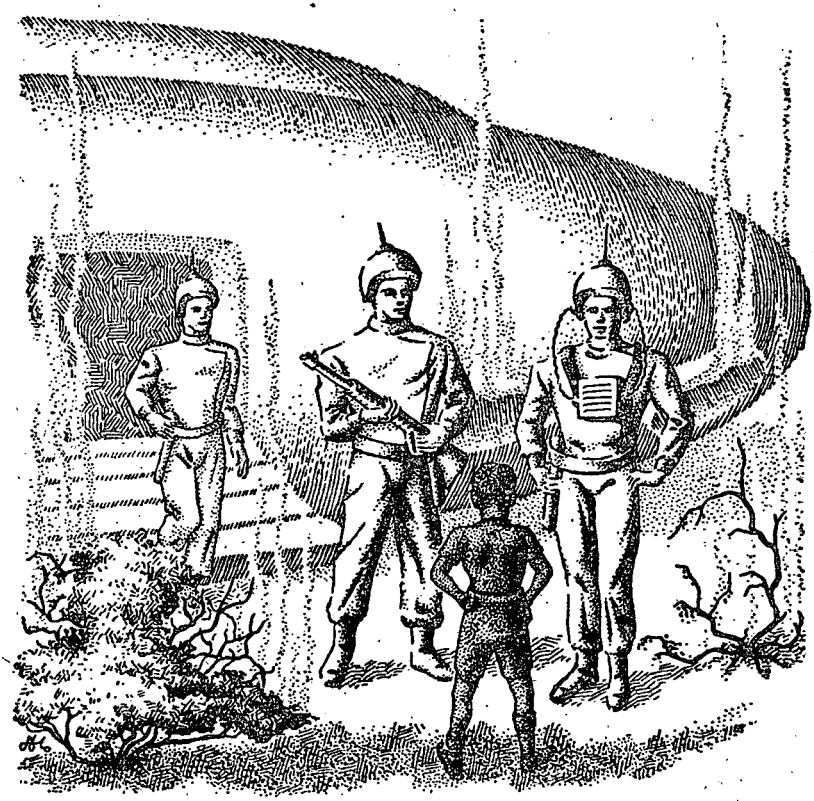

on the screen when the dials were manipulated. He became engrossed in the task of turning the dials, bringing first one and then another point of light sweeping across the screen.

"Utterly fantastic. Look—here is a man completely encased in a pressure suit while the other creature, presumably a female of the species, has only a helmet, breast-plates, belt and boots."

Quorro gravely inspected the illustration.

"Perhaps the females are able to stand the rigours of space without a pressure suit, requiring only breathing apparatus. It would appear that way—look, in every instance they appear scantily clad. Perhaps a stronger metabolism."

"Nonsense!"

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"Now look here, Nald, you aren't in a position to refute my theory—we know nothing about these people . . .

"Just a moment you two,' the Captain cut in mentally. *"I have been studying these chronicles carefully and must confess that there appear to be a number of absurdities to our way of thinking. But what may seem ridiculous to us may be commonplace to them. These pictures are no stranger than many things we have found during our travels in the Galaxy. I am inclined to think that they are highly fictionised versions of actual events, purposely distorted to appeal to the minds of children. Though we cannot read the language the pictures are self-explanatory.*

"For instance, take this drawing of a control room. It appears an extremely complex affair—switches, levers, dials, screens and gadgets everywhere—but it must be fairly factual. No-one could imagine such a layout without a basis for the pattern. Now look at this—the same room, but with a man running bare-footed. From the preceding illustrations we can see that the ship is in space and in free-fall, yet here is an Earth-being defying the absence of gravity. Impossible to us, but they may have machinery which can produce normal gravity in such ships."

His two crew-members considered his suggestion.

"I think your theory is a sound one," Nald nodded. "The illustrations certainly appear to have factual background, even though they seem to be incredible to us."

"Of course—but the pictures may have been modified to appeal to the imagination of the children."

Quorro, who had been sitting deeply in thought, suddenly shot a thought at his two companions.

"I have been carefully following some of these illustrations of machinery and I am convinced that they indicate the Earthmen have solved the problem of providing their ships with gravitational fields while in space. It looks as though our technicians are a long way behind these people in many things—we've been trying to solve that particular problem for years." He shuddered. **"I hate to think what would happen if we were caught out in space in free fall while these people were able to manoeuvre under normal gravity conditions."**

The Captain hastily rose to his feet.

"I think you're right. We must know more—perhaps the boy . . . he's gone."

The others leapt to their feet.

"Gone!"

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"Where did he go? Into the wood?"

"*No—I don't think—the ship!*"

They turned and ran towards the ship, the Captain pulling his blaster from its holster.

"*If he's done any damage I'll . . .*"

Tim stood in the lock entrance smiling serenely at them.

"Have you finished with my comics? Because if so I'd like them back. They belong to . . ."

"What have you been doing in the ship?" the Captain's voice bellowed through the translator box.

"Why—nothing. I was just looking around. Honest I was." Tim was pushed roughly to one side as the Captain brushed past him and entered the ship, only to emerge a few minutes later with a weak smile of relief on his face.

"*It's all right—he hasn't touched anything.*"

"**You're sure? The engines?**"

"*The seals are unbroken. We needn't worry.*"

"Now, about these—comics you call them?" the voice from the box said. "Have you any more?"

Tim looked from one to another of the alien crewmen. "Oh, yes," he replied. "Lots at home."

"At home?" the Captain asked. "Who else is at home?"

"No-one. They are all away for the day. Except my brother and he's at school—a University."

"Perhaps we could go there and see some more," the Captain said. At Tim's nod they all moved off into the wood, walking in single file through the recent imaginative battleground.

"He's studying to be an engineer," confided Tim to the Captain.

"Who is?"

"My brother."

"Oh, yes. Tell me, does your brother read these—comics?"

"Him? Not likely," Tim scornfully replied. "He says they are kid stuff. He's got plenty of good books. I try to read them sometimes but the words are too big and there aren't many pictures. I can't understand them."

"You mean these books are like your comics but more advanced?"

"Yes."

"Ah! Do you think we could have a look at some of them?"

"Yes, I suppose so, but you'll jave to be careful not to damage them or I'll get the blame."

Tim swung open the gate and led the three men along the path to the house. Opening the front door he stood back to let them enter.

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The Captain, followed by Nald and Quorro cautiously stepped through the doorway looking warily about them although obviously interested in everything they saw. Tim left them looking through the rooms on the ground floor while he went to the kitchen and hurriedly ate a couple of cakes and an apple to satisfy the ache in his stomach.

Returning to the main room he decided that as host he should mix the men a drink apiece. After all, that was what his father always did when they had company. Inviting the three men to sit down he busied himself at the sideboard cabinet adding shots from a wide variety of bottles and topping the tumblers up with soda water. He handed a filled glass to each and then dashed off to his brother's room to get some of the science fiction magazines and books.

Upon his return he was somewhat dismayed to find his new friends in varying stages of acute distress. The Captain, who had downed his glass in one long draught, was contorted with a paroxysm of coughing. Quorro was stretched full-length in his chair, legs asprawl, one hand weakly rubbing his stomach, while Nald who had only taken three fingers of the mixture sat dazedly holding his glass, tears streaming down his face from screwed-up eyes.

After a little while the Captain's voice said "What was in that?"

"Just whisky, and brandy, and gin, and a few other odd things—and soda—that's the fizzy stuff . . ."

"Never mind," the voice gasped, "just don't ask me to have another . . ."

"But," said Tim, looking rather astonished," there was nothing much in that glass. My father drinks it quite often. He says drink in moderation never hurts anyone."

"I should like to meet your father," remarked the Captain. "He must be quite a man." He carefully placed the glass on the table and took a deep breath. Quorro followed his example but Nald, still with an inch of liquor left in his glass, gazed benevolently at the boy.

"I find this drink rather stimulating," he thought at the Captain. "You have to assimilate it slowly to obtain the full benefit. I can feel a distinct warmth here—" he placed a hand carefully on his abdomen, "—ask the boy if I could have a little more."

At the Captain's question Tim handed over the entire bottle and watched with pleasure as the alien poured himself a generous measure of smoky Irish whisky. He was enjoying playing host. Nald tilted his glass and the Captain dragged his gaze away from the fascinating spectacle.

"These other books you mentioned—could we have a look at some now?"

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Tim picked up the pile of magazines he had brought and passed them to the two aliens who took them eagerly and began riffling through the pages.

"*I can't read this language.*"

"**We should have received conditioning for such a contingency. But who was to guess that this race was so far advanced ?**"

"*The pictures aren't very helpful, either. They seem to have little bearing upon one another. Perhaps they illustrate some part of the transcript.*"

He turned to Tim. "What are these books called ?" his voice asked from the box.

"The one you are looking at is called *New Worlds*," answered the boy. "I think most of them are *New Worlds*."

"*An appropriate enough title.*" He was silent for a few moments. "*I think I get the pattern,*" he mentally shot at Quorro. "*The comics are the first step in the education of the young—they illustrate, not too factually, various events which have or perhaps are taking place, for the most part in space.*

"*You will notice that all the illustrations portray deeds of valour, highly dramatised, so that they will leave a lasting impression upon the young mind. Then when the child is older he begins to absorb this—*" He tapped the open magazine.

"*Very clever. Start them off young dreaming about the wonders of interplanetary travel, then gradually by means of carefully illustrated magazines and books advance their knowledge to encompass more detailed work, so that by the time they are old enough their one ambition is to enter the Space Service to carry on the traditions they have been reading about for years.*"

He paused, selecting another magazine and skimming through it.

"*This would appear to be more factual. It looks like an article, probably related to the story following or preceding it.*"

He turned to Tim who was idly looking through a copy of *Science Fantasy*.

"Can you tell me what this says ?" he asked.

Tim stared at the heading. "Notes on Nu-cle-ar Rad-iation," he pronounced with some difficulty.

The Captain turned to his companions. "*You see ! I knew it !*" He turned a page.

"What does this graph represent ?" he asked the boy.

Tim looked doubtfully at the mass of lines and then painfully read the wording beneath. "It has something to do with 'Dis-tance and

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the Tol-er-ance Dose'," he volunteered. "My brother would understand it—he knows all about those things."

To his two crew members the Captain's thoughts came as an excited jumble.

"*This bears out what I have already said—these people prepare the race for space flight from the earliest possible moment—the older the boy gets the less fictionalized the books become—*" indicating a pile of magazines, "*—these are quite advanced. They portray detailed happenings and events that are true, interspersed with articles and up-to-date information on the various aspects of astronautics. And we have classified them as Phase Three !*"

"**What a terrible mistake we could have made**"'

Nald, who had been sorting absently through the pile of magazines, leaned across the table.

"I've found a good one here."

He stood up to walk round the table then fell back heavily into the chair. He blinked in astonishment, struggled to his feet only to collapse once again. His eyes had difficulty in focussing on the Captain.

"Something has happened to my legs—and when I stand up the room spins round—and round—and round—ha—now you've got two heads, Captain. Why have you got two heads when I only have one ? Eh ? Now there are three little boys—three little boys—three little boys . . ."

His thoughts ceased as his head fell forward on to his chest.

The Captain had jumped up in alarm at this rapid course of events. "What have you done to him ?" he asked Tim. "Have you poisoned him ?" He took a step towards the boy.

"He's drunk, not poisoned. He'll be all right when he wakes up."

"What's drunk ?"

Tim picked up the empty bottle and held it at arms length. "He's had too much of this."

The Captain relaxed and then bent forward and picked up the book Nald had let fall to the floor. His face assumed an alarmed expression as he looked through it.

"What is this book called ?" he enquired.

"*The Conquest Of Space,*" replied Tim. "And be careful of it. My brother doesn't let me look at it unless he is here to keep his eye on it. It's one of his most valuable books."

"The Conquest of space," the Captain murmured. "A form of history book." He paused at a page. "There's something familiar about this landscape," he said, tapping the page with a forefinger.

Tim looked over the arm holding the open book.

"That's Saturn," he said. "As seen from Mimas, one of the moons."

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"Which planet is Saturn?" the Captain shot at him.

"Which one? The sixth one, of course. The one with the rings."

The Captain paled visibly and breathed hard.

"*Quorro! I thought this visual angle appeared familiar. This is a colour photograph of the sixth planet taken from one of its satellites—and we have an entire fleet split up amongst those moons! Fleet headquarters is on this one they call Mimas—this is almost as I saw it when I reported there for this assignment.*"

"**I don't see anything wrong with the picture. The view wouldn't change between the time the photograph was taken and the time we landed—oh! I see! We didn't think they had space flight.**"

"*Exactly.*"

"**But, surely that isn't possible. We wouldn't put a fleet down on the satellite of a planet while there was a race in that system having space flight?**"

The Captain ignored his question. He was staring transfixed at a further picture in the book. "*Look at this!*" His thought stabbed at Quorro while the translator box echoed his voice into the room. "Read this to me," he ordered Tim, who had jumped with alarm at the crackling words.

Tim frowned in concentration. "Close up of another Sun," he slowly read. "The almost in-cred-dible sys-tem of the double star Mira seen from—"

"That's enough. That's enough," the Captain's voice cut in. He slumped dejectedly in his chair and passed a hand across his face.

"*That does it. We were thinking they had local space travel within their own System. Now we have found that they have star travel with intergalactic ships! They are probably much more advanced than we are—remember the boy asking us when we landed whether ours was a faster than light ship? I should have guessed it then.*"

He rose from his chair and began to pace the room.

"**What are we going to do?**"

"*What can we do? Why—get out of here as fast as possible and hope that we are not detected—that's the only thing left. Phase Three planet! Antiquated rockets! By the stars, I'd like to have a word with the armchair general who tagged them with that classification.*"

"**But we saw the rockets over the western hemisphere. Remember?**"

"*Probably children's toys!*" He motioned to the still sleeping figure of Nald. "*Get him on his feet and let's get out of here.*"

"**We haven't really obtained all the information we were detailed to get. Their military strength. Resistance to colonisation. Weapons—**"

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The Captain silenced him with a mental blast.

" Shut up ! We've got star travel. They have star travel. We have a fleet. They have a fleet. We might be able to beat them in a fight but we would be operating out of range of our home system. Suppose we lost such a battle ? How long do you think it would be before an Earth fleet burst into our own system thirsting for revenge ?" He shuddered at the thought. *" We are going to get out of here right now and get all this information back to HQ as soon as—"*

He was interrupted by a squeal from Tim. " It's almost time for Captain Sword," he shrilled, making a dash for the radio.

" Huh ? What's this ? " the Captain asked him.

" Captain Sword," patiently explained Tim, as he switched the set on, " is on the radio. The Earth-Fleet has finally caught up with the hordes from the other side of the Galaxy. They came out of space and attacked our outposts in Sirius and Andromeda, wiping out thousands of our ships with a new death ray. But Captain Sword found their hiding place," he beamed proudly, " and single-handed discovered the secret of the ray. Now we have a screen against it and our fleet has been chasing them for weeks. At last we have caught up with them and we'll wipe them out in the battle that will soon be starting."

The Captain stared at the boy in amazement, having already mentally translated the remarks to Quorro.

" You mean you are fighting an intergalactic war at this moment ?" he stammered. " Against whom ?"

" The Hordes," said Tim irritably. " Six legged things with tentacles. They're horrible." He shuddered.

" Where is this battle taking place ?" the Captain asked.

Tim looked puzzled for a moment. " Oh—a long way off—about eighty-two Parsecs from here, I think."

There was a pause as the alien's translator construed the symbol for a parsec into his own language. A startled squawk came from the box when the Captain realised the distance.

" You mean—you can receive radio waves from that distance ?"

" Shhhhsh !" muttered Tim, as a roar of static welled up in the radio. " It's coming on now !"

The static was toned down a little to be replaced by the exultant voice of the announcer.

" I am speaking to you from the bridge of the flagship of the Imperial Terran Fleet," he said, " and from where very soon now, orders will be given to descend and destroy once and for all the mighty fleet of The Hordes who have invaded our part of space.

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" If you were able to stand here with me, gazing at the might of the combined Navies of the Solar, Sirian and Rigellian Systems, I am sure you would feel, as I do, that the great sacrifices made by our gallant space crews who died so valiantly against terrible odds when we were first attacked—were not in vain. We are about to exact a terrible revenge upon these alien invaders. A revenge that will stop once and for all the threat of another invasion from outer space.

" As you know—due to the heroic bravery of Captain Sword, of the Interstellar Patrol, we have been able to devise an impenetrable screen against the frightful death ray possessed by them, and now, armed with atomic cannon, nuclear beams, disruptor torpedoes, and many other formidable weapons we shall, for the first time, meet the enemy on an equal footing.

" In a few moments you will be privileged to hear the voice of the Supreme Commander himself as he gives the order that will set this giant fleet in motion."

Quorro and the Captain appeared almost hypnotised by this sudden turn of events. Tensed on the edge of his chair the Captain twisted and untwisted his fingers as the static washed through the room.

" Gosh ! Isn't it exciting ?" Tim breathed. " I bet we blast them right out of space."

The Captain swallowed hard and rose to his feet. " We can stay no longer—we must get back to the ship. Urgent orders just come in." He bent to help Quorro get Nald to his feet. Half carrying the drunken crewman they staggered to the door.

Tim ran in front of them and opened it. " I was hoping you would stop and meet my folks," he said with a smile.

" No. Sorry," the Captain stated. " Must be off now. Don't say anything to anyone about seeing us, will you. We don't want to cause any trouble between our two races, do we ?" His smile was weak.

Tim shook his head. " I won't tell anyone. They wouldn't believe me, anyhow." He watched them disappear through the trees and then hurried back to listen to the last instalment of " Earth's Revenge." He was so absorbed that he didn't even notice the slight tremor that denoted the alien's ship taking off.

In free fall, hurtling towards the sixth planet and the fleet, Quorro and the Captain lay in their slings, gazing at the diminishing sphere that was Earth. A bulkhead door slid open and Nald floated through to grab a hand-rail. He was trembling.

" *Perhaps this will teach you not to partake of alien stimulants, Nald.*"

" It's not that—it's that boy "'

" **What about him ?**"

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"When he was in the ship the second time—by himself—he altered the Astrogration screen—he set up a getaway orbit that would have taken us into the Sun !"

"*What ?*"

"**What ?**"

"It's true. I just happened to glance at the screen. After you had shown him how it worked the first time, I set it ready for take-off. When I looked just now I saw that it had been changed."

The Captain stared aghast.

"*But it's impossible—a child of his age wouldn't have the knowledge to plot such an orbit. It must have been an accident—or coincidence.*"

"Coincidence or not, the fact remains that if I had not checked the screen we should have been in the gravitational pull of the Sun by the time you had relieved me."

The Captain loosened the straps holding him firmly in his sling and drifted across the tiny cabin.

"**What are you going to do ?**"

"*I was going to wait until we reached base before submitting a report, but now I'm going to record it electrically before anything else happens.*"

He switched on a small machine.

"*When Fleet HQ hear this they'll never want to run across this race again.*"

Quorro shifted uneasily in his sling.

"**I wonder what will happen when they run across us ?**"

They remained very still looking at one another.

P. W. Cutler

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It has always been a recognised preogative in wartime that opponents allow the Red Cross to succour the injured although there have been many incidents where this humane cause has been ignored. How would an alien race react to such a measure during a space battle ? Especially if there had been no common basis of negotiation beforehand.

TROJAN HEARSE

By Dan Morgan and John Kippax

Illustrated by LEWIS

Dnijar Two to Dnijar One Reporting:

Orbital defence stations quite invulnerable. Our largest energy guns make no impression beyond slight ripple in force field impulses. The planet appears to be completely covered by the ten stations—suggest this means that weapons of offence may be negligible. Report successful placing of Anadium bomb equipped with light shields at extreme edge of field perimeter, homed on most densely populated area of land mass Two North. Respectfully suggest that no change-over break in field will be allowed; thus bomb will probably have no opportunity to make contact. Suggest . . .

Dnijar One to Dnijar Two:

Suggestions not required. Tactical computer is in possession of all data so far received. Present requirements further information on cultural background and thought processes. Continue to monitor all transmissions.

* * * *

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" First, Mr. President, *first* know you're enemy." Robert Wallace, Commissioner of Terran Security Police, threw down the sheaf of reports and eyed his superior grimly. " If we had been allowed to develop offensive weapons with half the efficiency of the force-field defence this lot of murderers would have been blasted back to their own system by now, or else laid out on our lab tables."

" I know your feelings, Wallace. But as I said to you at the time of the appropriations, there are other ways of looking at these matters. You have a military mind. That is necessary for a man in your position, but don't be blind to the facts of history: one more world war and man would have committed racial suicide. Only the fortuitous development of the Borg field, the perfect defence against any known weapon, finally toppled the old dog-eat-dog principle."

The old man sat with his thin white hands folded calmly on his lap. Wallace stared at him coldly. Only a politician could utter such crashing platitudes at a time like this. When he spoke, the tone of his deep voice expressed his disapproval.

" But this is a strange dog: how can you be so confident that he works to our rules ?"

One pale hand fluttered lightly.

" Wallace, I am willing to stake my position that beings as intelligent as those opposing us can be deterred by the use of cool logic—the Solar Federation is a living proof of such methods. They cannot attack earth directly: the force field is one hundred per cent: that will surely give us time . . ."

" Time ! Time is only of value if we can take aggressive action. I tell you this Dr. Okawa—if we had spared a little more time and money when we were designing those force field stations, to fitting them with plain ordinary energy guns, we might not be in this spot now. Why, just because our own system is at peace, we should assume that others are as morally civilised as ourselves, is quite beyond me. I said so at the time and was branded a warmonger for my pains."

The president gave a movement expressive of irritation, as though he would deny the Commissioner's statement, but Wallace continued: he was not the sort of man to brook interruption at a time like this.

"—I wanted equipment and technicians to prepare for the protection of all colonised planets, but the armchair professors of the Federation Council had me bound and gagged over the meaning of the word ' defence.' Guns ? Oh, no. Quite unthinkable ! And now look at us ! Maybe those things slavering round up there can't get at us right away, but given *time*, as you seem to suggest, they'll find *some* way. Get rid of the idea that time is on our side ! Sooner or later we shall have to send out supply ships to Mercury and Pluto; remember that

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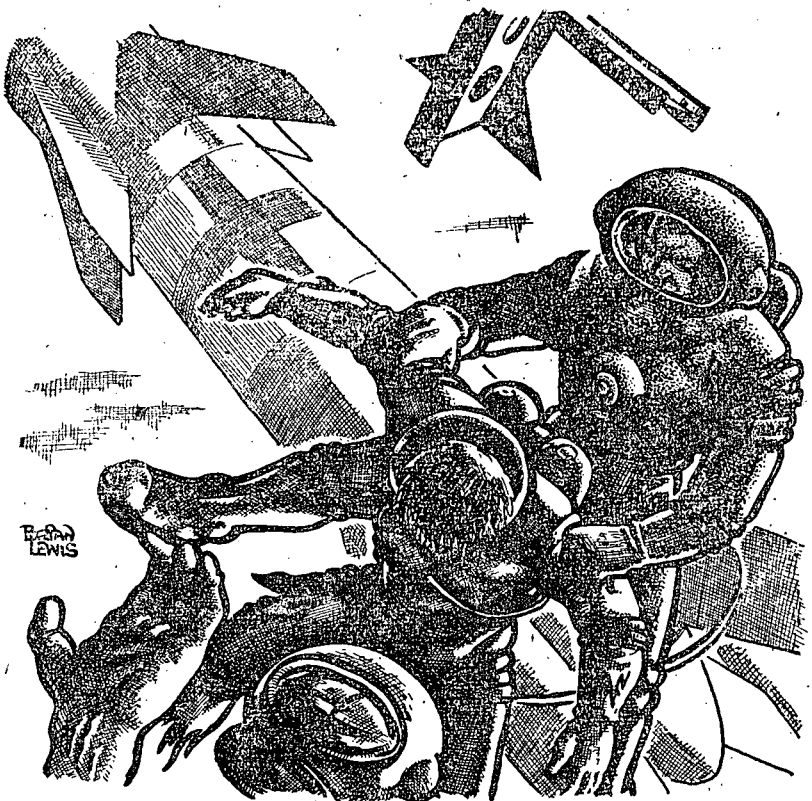

they are not yet fully self supporting, and to do that we shall have to lower the field. *And when we do . . .*"

"I am advised that that situation will not arise for another two months at least," put in the president. "They have checked with the colonies you mention on the sub-etheric radio and this has been agreed as the minimum relief period."

Wallace's eyes widened.

"God God, man! Don't you realise that these things will have cracked and understood any code or language we care to use? What are you trying to do—give them a delivery date?"

The president maintained his calm.

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"You forget the Venusian expedition," he answered. "Two ships equipped with the latest energy weapons are well on their way to intercepting the invaders."

Wallace made a wry face.

"To think that the hub of the Solar system has to look to a handful of colonists for its defence! They're a brave bunch, but they'll find themselves outclassed. In the meantime, I have given orders for supply rockets to begin shuttling up energy guns and technicians to the stations, including those used for TV relay. This seemed the right thing to do—I hope it meets with your approval."

"Purely as a defence measure, yes. Since the disintegration of that freighter by these—people—we must assume that their intentions are for the worst." He leaned forward slightly. "However, I must remind you, Commissioner, that supreme command of our forces rests with me. Not one blast must be fired without my consent."

This was not the way Wallace would have had it. His hands clenched and unclenched as he bit back a fiery retort.

"I have already proclaimed Terra at emergency plan Two," continued the president softly, "as yet I don't think that we are justified in declaring full emergency, but all hospitals and first grade life-services are standing by. I shall broadcast on a world hook-up at nine-thirty. The content of my speech will depend upon the reports we are now awaiting." The expressive hands fluttered again. "Anything we can do to avoid a general alarm must be done."

With a slight stiffness that was part emotional and part physical, Wallace rose from his seat and walked over to the transparent wall. Perched on the top story of the administration block the Commissioner's office commanded an impressive view of the great Dongarra spaceport. He opened a window, and sounds flooded into the room. Behind the hum of workshops and testing beds rose the distant, ominous snarl of the short winged ferry ships' powerful motors. Soon they would be taking up the means by which Terra would be freed from the unknown menace that was probing the defences. Wallace let a grim smile of satisfaction crease his rugged features.

On the other side of the room a tiny spot of light was flickering under the telecom. Swiftly, he walked over and flipped a switch.

"Wallace here."

"Sir!" The operator's voice sounded excited. "Colonel Carter on Luna wants you." There was a crackle and a whirl of atmospheric garbage noise, then the colonel's face appeared on the screen.

"Hallo Jim," said Wallace, "careful what you say—they'll be listening."

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Carter made an indelicate gesture.

"You can have the president tell them tonight," he said grimly, "that the only reason why Terra is still in existence is because we kept the first experimental force fields here running. No sane person would want this lump of rock for its own sake, but the aliens just made a darkside bomb attack. It's my belief that they were trying to put the satellite off orbit and throw her at Terra."

The president was now standing beside Wallace.

"*I* shall decide the contents of my speech," he said coolly. "Continue your report please, colonel. Did you take readings of the force of the attack?"

The face on the screen flickered and the expression hardened.

"We tried—but unfortunately we have no machine here on Luna capable of registering such a force."

The pale hands of the president fluttered like captive butterflies. Then he moved away. The shadows seemed to grow on Wallace's face as he replied.

"Hold on up there, Jim. We shall soon be hitting back. Put your base on full emergency and sit tight."

"Any other instructions sir?" queried Carter. "Some of my men had a crazy idea of taking out a couple of supply rockets and trying to ram them."

Wallace felt a rush of pride. These were *his* kind—fighting men.

"No, Jim," he said regretfully, "just stand by—and good luck."

The picture faded, and Wallace switched off. He walked back to the transparent wall, and watched the dusk creep in as the sun set under the rim of the only unfertile stretch left in Western Australia. Way out on the horizon a lambent flame crept into the sky. As it gathered speed it was followed by another and another—five more. The first flight of ferry ships were on their way to the orbital stations, taking up the teeth which, in the name of peace, they had never had before.

Wallace heaved a great sigh. The emotion he felt tore at the very core of the man.

"Just let them not be too late!" he murmured.

* * * *

Dnijar Two to Dnijar One Reporting:

Semantographic converter jamming on certain concepts from this planet's transmissions. List follows for Ayap's evaluation. In particular meaning of sounds: kurage, luv, gud luk and devo shun.

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Dnijar One to Dnijar Two.

You waste energy. Comment not required. Continue collection of data on enemy life ways and habit patterns. We have but seventeen tauls before they will have their energy guns mounted. You may expect extinction by high Dnijar if you have placed Anadium bomb incorrectly. Too many uselessly expended on satellite. . .

Dnijar Two to Dnijar One.

Confident here that bomb is at weakest point of field. If there is slight break in force field down to one fortieth of a grint, bomb will get through. Data indicates that these beings place great value on preservation of life force of each individual. Impact of bomb on large dwelling area will cause rising condition of defeatism. Confident here.

Dnijar One to Dnijar Two.

Listen with great care to their generators in orbital stations. Change of note may signify bomb's opportunity.

Dnijar Two to Dnijar One.

All listening points working. Bomb instructed to retire at end of period of sixteen and one half tauls. Please hold. New facts just received. When life force leaves one of these beings, outer remaining life husk is placed in hole in planet's surface and covered ceremonially.

Dnijar One to Dnijar Two.

Check your circuits in manner laid down and bring your reportage to full coherence standard. Their Venusian ships will be within range within half of one taul. Check your armament and stand by.

* * * *

Commissioner Wallace glanced at his watch.

" Twenty-three hundred hours. Installation on three of the orbital stations will have commenced by now. If only we knew more about their methods—we could be working in the wrong direction."

The president smiled faintly.

" Come now, Wallace. Let us not begin to doubt ourselves already. The coming combat will give us a clearer grasp of the situation. It may even open a field for negotiation."

Negotiation ! Wallace ignored the older man's words and walked over to the telecom. He switched on and a moment later the operator's face appeared.

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" Orbital stations report, regular sequence," he requested curtly. The screen went blank for a moment. Then a lean young face flowed into view.

" Orbital station One—commander Farrer reporting sir," said the officer in a clear North American accent. " Antarctic region generators throwing steadily. Radic sweeps register nil. All preparatory dismantling and shaping for reception of guns completed. Standing by."

The station commander saluted and his image faded from the screen. Stations Two to Five followed with equally brief routine reports.

" Orbital station Six, lieutenant Schwartz reporting sir. Installations proceeding smoothly. Field generators throwing steadily." Schwartz had a grim young face crowned by a blonde crew-cut. "Radic sweep reports object of small dimensions at point of junction with station Seven . . ."

The formality of a salute was negated as Wallace broke contact.

" Get me Seven," he shouted to the operator. Almost before the face of the Chinese commander was in focus the Commissioner barked the question, " Is your radic at full sweep ? Check !"

Bewilderment showed on the officer's face, but he hastened to obey. Commissioner Wallace swore with writhing lips. This might mean that the sweep had missed an area that was large enough to contain . . .

The oriental face appeared on the screen again.

" It was at a hundred and eighty-nine degrees sir."

Wallace's features were a hard and ruthless mask.

" You're under open arrest ! What does the radic tell you now ?"

" There is a reflection from something at the junction of our field and that of Western Europe station, sir," answered the officer shakily. " Spectra eye can locate nothing. Suggest that it is a small meteor, or other minor interference."

There was no softening of the Commissioner's face.

" Let's hope you're right . . ." he broke off as the operator cut in.

" Station Eight reports Venusian ships sighted. Shall I switch you over, sir ?"

" At once !" He turned to the president as the image of the chastened Chinese faded. " Now we shall see how the aliens like the taste of our energy weapons. At last we're going to hit back ! I wish like hell I could be out there with those boys."

The president shook his head, conscious of a principle sacrificed.

" I would have preferred negotiation. But these colonials are an impetuous crowd: we can only watch and hope."

The sound soughed and wailed a little, and then the jewel-hung blackness of space appeared on the screen.

The commander of station Eight took over.

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"There should be something to see in a moment, sir," he said, "I'll switch over to beam and spectrum control—"

Came a click and a whirr. The velvet dark of the picture faded to a rusty brown, and the stars shone pale and yellow, unavoidable accompaniment of the beam which could take them to meet the incoming Venusians.

The picture flickered and blurred uncertainly. Minutes passed in silence. Then the Commissioner and his frail companion stiffened as the two cigar shapes swam into view.

"Now we shall see," murmured the president, and the silence between them was an oppressive, almost tangible thing.

A black shape swept across the screen with incredible velocity; Wallace inhaled sharply as the leading Venusian ship disappeared momentarily in a whirl of coruscating energy. Then the image cleared, and the terrible damage was visible. The leading ship was a battered hulk, reeling off course and out of control. Wallace saw the tiny dots that were her crew drift forth into the void from the great gash in her side.

"God! This is hopeless! Their weapons have twice the range of ours" he groaned, as the second Venusian ship bored on towards the aliens.

"Good luck, you fools!" he shouted. Still two thousand miles out of range, the guns of the Venusian flared out a constant barrage. Wallace snarled his impotent rage as he saw the second ship meet the fate of her companion—the same blinding flash, the dreadful wrecking, the crew flung forth like devil-sown seed across the fields of hell.

It was at this point that the force field generators on station seven finished their five day spell and others were automatically switched in. For the merest fraction of a second, no force field existed over that area.

* * * *

Dnijar Two to Dnijar One.

. . . . the error was not made here. Records prove bomb setting was exactly as instructed. Estimate explosion took place in centre of light patch on north western side of land mass. Suggest second opportunity may occur if enemy are unaware of inefficient switchover mechanisms. Suggest we wait and continue to monitor. Suggest that contact with High Dnijar not feasible at this distance. Suggest . . .

Dnijar One to Dnijar Two.

Previous instructions regarding your suggestions referred to. Proceed at once to location of recently neutralised enemy ships and bring into orbit about planet. Send out investigators.

* * * *

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The president laid the latest prints from the telenews service on the desk of Commissioner Wallace. The headlines screamed blackly.

PUBLIC DEMANDS TO KNOW WHY METEOR GOT THROUGH FORCE FIELD! NORTH WESTERN TERRITORIES DEVASTATED! TIMBER AND WILD LIFE DESTRUCTION INCALCULABLE. LOSS OF HUMAN LIFE SMALL.

The cynical attitude of the police Commissioner towards 'men of words' came to the surface.

"What wonders are performed in the interests of public safety!" said Wallace, his lip curling slightly. "Meteor! Your politicians are great on this public relations stuff—but how long do you think you can fool the people?"

"The truth would cause a general panic," answered the president. "To tell about the bomb and the loss of the Venusian ships would cause a disastrous loss of confidence in the government."

Irrationally, Wallace felt the cleverness of these arguments was directed against him.

"I see. But where do we go from here? The stations are now fully armed, but we don't dare lower the screen and engage for fear they have a swarm of bombs just outside. The position is at deadlock."

The president smoothed his white hair. His manner was that of a man who has more to tell.

"Not quite, Commissioner. As you remarked, public relations is a strong point with the minds that guide world government. We may say that we are right in assuming that the aliens listen to all our broadcasts?"

Wallace nodded: Was this more politics?

"Working on that assumption," continued the president, "I have caused all government and commercial stations to relay continuously a special programme prepared by my semanticists. The theme of the programme is the ancient concept of the red cross. It explains how in our wars of long ago it was the custom after a battle to allow unarmed men to collect the bodies of the fallen and give them decent burial. In principle it is an indirect appeal to allow us to recover the bodies of the Venusian colonists."

Wallace exploded. "You can't be serious! Why should they allow such a thing? This is an entirely alien culture we're dealing with, and a pretty bloodthirsty one at that. This is WAR man, whether you like it or not!"

The president was unmoved by the outburst.

"You have yourself admitted that the present situation is a deadlock. Just *suppose* they responded to this appeal. That would mean

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that we have some common ground on which to base negotiations, and a peace of some kind might be arranged. Are you so blinded by the bull-headed desire for action that you can't *see* the possibility?"

Wallace found himself a cigarette. He gazed with narrowed eyes into the flame of the match, and inhaled deeply.

"And if they didn't respond . . . more lives wasted, another ship gone."

"Better than a wrecked world," retorted the president, "and I feel sure that we have men who would undertake the risk."

Wallace rose from his chair and looked out and up through the transparent wall; the night sky glittered remotely. Our there the enemy was waiting—waiting. He knew that they must be smashed very soon or else . . . He threw the cigarette to the floor, and ground it out with a twisting stab of his heel.

"The men for this job would be volunteers?"

"Naturally," replied the president, "there would be no question of compulsion."

Wallace moved back to the centre of the room, and faced the president. Incoherent ideas were running through his mind—a scheme scarcely admitted.

"Then I'll go. I may be getting a bit long in the tooth, but I can still pilot a ship."

"You understand that this is to be a mission of peace—entirely unarmed?" They exchanged keen glances.

"Of course. What good could one ship do, even armed to the teeth?" Wallace spread his hands; his voice held no harshness now. "You saw what happened to the Venusians. Against such power, anything we might try to do would be suicide."

"And unethical," said the president. "Any attack, successful or not, would ruin the chances of a settlement. You do appreciate that?"

Wallace looked back at him steadily.

"Perfectly," he said.

* * * *

Dnijar One to Dnijar Two.

It is clear that we shall not obtain ingress for some time by means of present tactics. Their guns have short range, but suspect they have dangerous power. No possibility of lying close to perimeter as with bomb. Tactical computer gives only two possible solutions to problem. (1) *Retire and consult with High Dnijar.* (2) *Execute computer's variant of plan Z45. Retreat impossible, apart from loss of time. Therefore proceed at top speed to vicinity of neutralised Venusian ships and proceed as in Z45. Signal for regrouping will follow when situation is favourable.*

* * * *

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The orbital stations timed the fractional cut off with great skill as the mercy ship, bearing huge red crosses on either side of her hull knifed out into space. A speck of time later, the force field was working again. Wallace felt the old surge of elation as his fingers rested over the firing keys. Out here in space a man could think clearly—all the petty stupidity and softness of life was gone, and in its place reigned the impersonal, star-studded blackness, with its challenge that made man something nearer to a god—or less than the cosmic dust.

He switched on the intercom.

"Estimate trajectory should intersect orbit of the derelicts within thirty minutes at the present speed. Have your men standing by in main air lock ready to carry out salvage operation as briefed, as soon as we have matched velocity with the wrecks."

"Yes, sir." It was the voice of the lieutenant in charge of the party. "All men in suits and standing by." There was a pause. "Do you really think they'll leave us alone, sir?"

Wallace was peering at the forward vision screen. Two sleek black shapes slid into view around the curve of Terra—a mere five hundred miles from the poor hulks of the Venusian ships.

One corner of his mouth puckered.

"We'll soon find out, lieutenant."

The silent tragedy drifted closer as Wallace trimmed his craft to a sympathetic velocity. The two ships lay close together, the rips and gashes in their sides plainly visible. Of the tiny satellites that floated about them, some were still human in form; others were—incomplete, drifting in a slow-seeming dance of death which would have lasted through all eternity.

Wallace cut the drive.

"You're in luck, lieutenant," he said, "the bodies are close together. Get your men outside, and don't waste any time. This is no sight-seeing tour. Those things out there might change their minds about us."

His mind was a whirl of forward-seeking thought as he watched the grotesquely space-suited figures propel themselves towards the wrecks. Each towed a glittering plexiplast tube large enough to hold a man—or what was left of him.

The Commissioner looked at the alien ships. He could see no lights, and his detectors showed there was no radiation from their drive tubes. Maybe Okawa knew what he was talking about after all. It seemed incredible that this unknown race of destroyers should observe what was to them an alien custom—and the red cross ship made such a

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sitting target ! This was a time for concentration on the job and for not letting the imagination run loose for a moment.

The men outside were manoeuvring the remains of the Venusians into the tubes. Helmet radios were on, but were to be used only in emergency. One of the volunteers was making little sobbing and sucking noises as he manipulated the contents of a tube. Wallace could see that there was good reason for the sounds. There was still no sign of activity from the alien ships. The procession of space-suited men began to move back to the ship, slowly towing their burdens behind them, while Wallace watched them in a sweat that derived from an anxiety for their safety which was at once linked to the desparate idea that was tormenting him. The habit of obedience that was deep within him was cracking under the strain.

" Five minutes," he muttered. " They must, they *must* hold off that long." He thought of the president, and the apparent success of the old man's plan. Now he would crow about his ' cool clear logic ' after this ! Or—would he get the chance ?

A light sparked on the control panel.

" All men and bodies inboard, sir," came the voice of the lieutenant.

Wallace's hand was poised over the firing keys.

This was *it*.

" Right—prepare for acceleration *ten seconds from—NOW* !"

He shot a glance of pure hatred at the screen that showed him the shapes of the two enemy ships. His mind was made up. *This* was what was needed. He would die, but it would be fighting. Terms ? Only idealistic fools like Okawa talked such nonsense.

The drive of the Red Cross ship burst into life and she lunged forward to meet the aliens. A plate in the nose of the ship slid back, revealing a heavy calibre energy gun.

" *This* for your ethics !" gritted Wallace, and he pressed the firing button. Dog eat dog, the president had said. The energy gun poured forth a continuous sheet of murderous flame as Wallace sought to whip his ship to the utmost power to bring her within range. His eyes were wide, and the tension in his body reached an almost unbearable pitch as the energy beam got home on the hull of the still unresponsive alien. He passed overhead and slammed the ship into a cruel deceleration. He switched on the rear vision screen, and laughed in savage delight as he saw the horrific damage he had left behind him. The alien ship was a total wreck, even as the Venusians had been. Surely the second one would not be so easy ?

The intercom spat into nervous life.

" For God's sake Commissioner, what's going on ? Are we being attacked ?"

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The salvage party in the rear compartment had no vision screen: blind to outside happenings and strapped to their couches, there was some reason for their alarm.

"No, lieutenant: *we're* attacking!" Wallace put the ship into a steep turn and headed for the other alien. "Stick to your couches and pray!"

He held the rescue ship on course as the image of the second alien grew larger in the forward screen. Surely he could not succeed again! The enemy remained silent as the seconds ticked away with a grinding slowness. And still the black shape showed no response. His meters told him that he was almost within range. Savagely, he thumbed the firing button, and the beam lanced out and made contact. A second later the very stars seemed shaken by a soundless explosion. The black ship disintegrated into a swarm of molten metal globules, and Wallace screamed in victory as they cut through the new born meteors. For a few moments, the inebriated feeling of the reaction from what he had done was overwhelming—his hands were still trembling as he took the ship down to Terra's unseen barrier. He switched on the sub etheric communicator.

"Wallace to orbital stations—Wallace to orbital stations—Mission completed. Alien ships neutralised. Coming in—stand by to lower field."

The president's pale old fist smacked down onto the desk with surprising force; this was no hero that he saw in front of him.

"You madman!" His frail body quivered with rage. "*Do you realise* what you have done?"

His manner could not intimidate Wallace: the man was flushed with the greatness of his triumph.

"They went down like sitting ducks. There's an end to your alien menace! Two minutes of action is worth all your talk, Dr. Okawa."

The president spoke slowly, as though to a backward child.

"And what of the other ships they may have? What if you have stirred up a hornet's nest that will devour the whole Solar system?"

"Let them come—they'll get the same treatment." The taste of blood was sweet in the mouth of the lion.

"You great blind fool! We still know nothing about them! Hadn't they weapons which could have smashed you out of existence before you were even within range? Why didn't they use them? *Why*?

Wallace was bordering contempt.

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" I'll leave that to your professors. All I know is, that there won't be any more trouble from the aliens. If you want, I'm quite willing to go out and collect data on what remains."

The president's hand moved nearer a button on his desk.

" Wallace, you stand there thinking of yourself as a hero, but you're not: you are a mad dog, and as such, you will have to be put under restraint."

Wallace paled, but he was still confident.

" You're not serious ? The people would never allow it after what I've done. They will realise that I have saved us from the invaders, and they will be on my side !"

Without any display of feeling, the president pushed the telenews prints across the desk.

ALIEN INVADERS DESTROYED BY HEROIC VENUSIAN SUICIDE MISSION ! PRESIDENT AGREES POSTHUMOUS AWARD OF SOLAR CROSS TO ALL MEMBERS.

CATHEDRAL INTERNMENT WITH FULL MILITARY HONOURS.

" Public relations, my friend," purred the president. Wallace's hands were shaking, and the headlines blurred before his eyes. Okawa pressed the button over which his fingers had been lingering, and two dark uniformed men stepped into the room. Wallace's self control broke, and he lunged forward in fury only to be stopped as strong hands closed on him from behind.

* * * *

Dnijar Two to Dnijar One reporting.

Alien life husks decomposing rapidly. Units complain that resultant heat is causing discomfort. Request permission to vacate husks and burrow to surface of planet.

Dnijar One to Dnijar Two.

Discomfort unimportant. Plan Z45 proceeding satisfactorily. Enemy totally unaware of our infiltration. Regrouping will commence in one taul when darkness will give added security.

Dan Morgan and John Kippax

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Many interesting stories have been written about contra-terrene matter—in particular Jack Williamson's two fine novels Seetee Ship *and* Seetee Shock*—yet to the ordinary reader there is much of mystery concerning what this un-earthly atomic structure really is. John Newman's article this month clarifies the position of 'seetee' in its relationship to matter and energy in the Galaxy.*

ENERGY

By John Newman

For some time scientists have considered the possibility of contra-terrene matter existing in the Universe. The idea of this seetee (from the initial letters of contra-terrene) matter, where electrical charges are reversed to give negatively charged protons and positively charged electrons, has been used by several science-fiction writers but it was not until recently, at the end of 1953, that proof of its existence was obtained by an American physicist, Dr. Marcel Schein, and his co-workers at the University of Chicago.

A packet of photographic plates was sent twenty miles up by balloon and, when the plates were developed, they showed evidence that a tremendously powerful nuclear disintegration had taken place in the film pack. The energy involved was so fantastically enormous, fifty million times the energy of a splitting uranium atom, that it could have only resulted from the complete annihilation of matter. The 'something' which caused this was a negative proton from space striking an ordinary proton in the packet, the two mutually destroying one another and radiating their lost mass as energy. This energy appeared in the film pack as enormously 'hard' gamma rays that left trails of ions behind them as they smashed through the photographic

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emulsion. From these trails the number and power of the rays could be calculated and, from those, the energy of the original disintegration estimated.

In the mutual destruction of seetee and ordinary matter lies the most intense energy source of which we know; energy so concentrated that, if we could only obtain and efficiently harness it, the mass ratio problem of space ships would no longer trouble us. For this disintegration liberates ten thousand million million electron volts, whilst only a miserly three electron volts are obtained by the reaction of hydrogen and oxygen to form a molecule of water.

The *electron volt* is a unit of energy used by physicists and is replacing the older units (foot-pounds, calories), for it can be applied to a large number of sciences; to electronic, chemical and nuclear reactions as well as to classical physics. It is defined as the voltage of the electrical field through which an electron must ' fall ' gaining speed and energy, to equal the energy of a given particle or reaction.

One of the few things which distinguishes Man from other creatures is his ability to control and use various forms of energy. In fact, any technological civilisation can be classified according to the types and amounts of the available energy that it uses. Man naturally uses chemical energy. His fuel is the food that he burns, together with oxygen, in his muscles. But, apart from this, the first outside energy that he subordinated to his own uses was the physical energy of gravity —the rock dropped on his neighbour's head, the pit trap to catch animals. Very low order energy involving only fractions of electron volts per atom.

Fire, a chemical energy, was the next step in Man's use of natural forces. Firstly it was used only for cooking, heating and cracking rocks. It was thousands of years before it could be used as a prime energy source in steam engines; thousands of years before the art of engineering was capable of constructing the engines. This, characteristically, was some time after the energy of chemical reaction had been used for destructive purposes in the form of gunpowder. The acceleration of inventions is shown by the shortening intervals between the utilization of the water wheel, the steam engine, the internal combustion engine, the nuclear powered steam turbine and . . . whither hence ?

The step from the application of chemical energy in an internal combustion engine to the first useful applications of nuclear energy was a small one measured in terms of time but a gigantic one when measured in terms of energy potential. It opened up not just a new field but a whole Universe to us; it changed our available resources

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from those of a tiny planet, with an ever increasing population and fast diminishing natural resources of coal, oil, wood and ores, to those of a galaxy. For nuclear energy is more than the splitting of uranium nuclei into roughly equal parts with the release of a little of the energy; it is the basic power of the Universe, the inter-conversion of mass and pure energy. From one can be built the other.

The Galaxy contains millions of visible stars, millions more as yet invisible. Each is an immense nuclear furnace, one of a limited number of types depending upon its size and the nuclear transformations taking place inside it. Each is an efficient mechanism for the conversion of mass into energy, self regulating, stable for millions of years and, according to the latest theories, self supporting from the cosmic dust it collects. Rarely does the mechanism go wrong and a star flare into a nova.

The greater part of the energy on Earth comes directly or indirectly from the nuclear energy of the Sun. Only a small proportion of its vast production falls on the Earth's atmosphere where most of the harsher radiation, the gamma rays and high ultra violet are filtered out. Of the remainder, part is trapped and stored in plants by the elaborate chemistry of photosynthesis, part converted into the kinetic energy of the wind, part into the potential energy of water in clouds, as rain, as rivers, and part radiated and reflected back into space.

The actual amount of energy received on the Earth's surface per unit area per unit time is quite small. Only in a few places can it be utilized directly and then only by the use of elaborate reflectors and boilers. It is the stored energy of the Sun—collected and stored over tens or hundreds of years—that we use in our inefficient energy converters, wasting the greater part of it in heating rivers or the atmosphere.

Energy is broadly defined as a capacity for doing work, work being done when energy goes from a high level to a lower one. Power is calculated as the amount of energy used in a certain time period.

Following Einstein's monumental work at the beginning of this century, it was generally recognised that energy and mass are interconvertible, at least in theory. The old 'Conservation of Energy' and 'Conservation of Mass' laws had to be amended, although the general idea that one cannot obtain either energy or mass without paying for them was still true. Calculations were made of the amount of energy expected from the annihilation of matter and these were of such a remarkably large size as to be fantastic at that time. It was realised that the energy of the Sun and stars and of radio-active elements was probably derived from such a source but there was no known way in which this could be controlled and used on Earth.

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Chemical energy was, still is and will be for some time the mainstay of our civilisation. Curiously enough, it is basically an electrical force, involving changes in the position of electrons on the outside of atoms and molecules. If, when two atoms approach one another, they are capable of forming a stable structure containing less energy than the separate atoms, then the extra energy is evolved as heat or an electric current. The energy is produced in small units of energy called quanta, fractions of which cannot exist in any state. There is a limitation on the amount of chemical energy available from a given weight of any fuel. This theoretical maximum is ten electron volts an atom, although only about half of this is actually obtained in the large scale reactions that we use. An Einsteinian loss of mass equivalent to the energy produced does occur but it is so small that it is almost impossible to measure.

Most chemical fuels involve an oxidation reaction using oxygen from the air. Rockets use chemical reactions, but here the two reactants are carried separately and the energy of reaction trapped in the exhaust gases so that the kinetic energy of the gases can be directly utilised.

The difference between a steady burning and an explosion is merely the speed of reaction, itself dependent on the speed of the atoms carrying enough energy from the reaction zone to trigger the unexploded material. This also has a theoretical maximum and modern explosives have almost reached this maximum speed, now being about as efficient as are possible. To obtain greater explosive power much larger changes in energy must be undergone in the atom, using nuclear instead of electronic reactions.

There are four known ways by which nuclear energy can be obtained, three of them depending on the immensely powerful force binding the particles together in the nucleus. This is known as nuclei force and has many characteristics entirely different from electric, magnetic and gravitic forces. It does not obey the inverse square law, *i.e.*, it does not diminish as the square of the distance from the source, and is millions of times stronger than other field forces. At short distances it far outbalances the electric repulsion of similar positive charges so that protons in the nucleus stick together very, very strongly.

The first method of obtaining nuclear energy, the main stellar process, is the combination of neutrons and protons to form helium nuclei. Helium is a chemically inert gas and its nucleus is the most stable that we know. Being the most stable it must also contain less energy per particle in its nucleus than any other element. When two protons and two neutrons, each of mass 1, combine to form a helium nucleus of mass 3.97 the missing 0.03 units of mass appear as twenty-eight million electron volts. Man now indirectly uses this in the hydro-

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gen bomb, for he has yet to learn to control and convert this power for creative purposes.

On Earth neither protons nor neutrons are found free in any quantity, so alternatives must be found. Heavy hydrogen, deuterium, contains one proton and one neutron so that, if two of these can be made to combine, they will form a helium nucleus. This reaction gives six million electron volts but, for it to take place, the reactants must be heated to one hundred million degrees. This temperature can be obtained by using an ordinary atomic bomb, after which the fusion reaction supplies enough heat to keep itself going for a fraction of a milli-second. It is the tremendous energy produced in such a short time that causes the explosion.

Another possibility is to use tritium, the other isotope of hydrogen, as the fuel. This will react with either protons or heavy hydrogen to form helium. Unfortunately tritium is very rare and has to be made in an atomic pile, being much more expensive than heavy hydrogen. The cheapest material for a fusion reaction is lithium hydride, a compound of lithium and hydrogen. At high enough temperatures, the hydrogen atom becomes a proton and this reacts with the three protons and four neutrons of the lithium to evolve seventeen million electron volts. But, as the repulsive force between a lithium nucleus and a proton is three times that of any of the isotopes of hydrogen, a very much higher initial temperature is required to start the reaction. The present types of hydrogen bombs probably combine several of these reactions; say a uranium fission bomb as a match to start the fire, heavy hydrogen to act as kindling and lithium hydride as the main fuel.

Because the latter fuels can be used in any quantity, there is no problem of critical mass for the designers to worry about and there is no limit to the size of such a bomb. It would be possible for a fanatical party losing a war to kill themselves, and all others on the Earth, by exploding one large enough to destroy the planet, in a " If we can't have it, neither can you," sort of attitude.

A second method of obtaining energy is by the splitting off of a helium nucleus from a heavy atom. This sometimes occurs during radio-active breakdowns, when the fast moving helium nucleus that is liberated is known as an alpha ray. This yields up to ten million electron volts per nucleus, but the power output is uncontrollable, depending on the mass of radio-active material present. It is possible that, in the future, the energy of radio-activity will be used in small electric batteries where the current is formed by the direct effect of radiation on a semi-conductor such as germanium.

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The third method, already widely used, is the splitting of heavy nuclei into two parts of similar mass. This can be done by reacting a heavy nucleus with slow or fast neutrons; because they have no electrical charge they can easily approach and sometimes enter nuclei. It is their disturbing presence which causes the atom to disintegrate, as if in anger at the intruder. Slow neutrons with only a few electron volts of kinetic energy can bring this about, there being a measurable time period between absorbtion and fission whilst energies rearrange themselves in the nucleus. Only atoms heavier than bismuth and with an odd mass number are fissile by slow neutrons. The only two such elements available in quantity are uranium 235, occurring naturally, and plutonium 239, made from uranium 238 in atomic piles. Both give self-sustaining chain reactions because they produce more than one neutron for every one absorbed. The fission of uranium gives two hundred million electron volts for every atom split; further energy can be obtained from the remaining radio-active fragments as they continue to decay.

The fourth method is the complete annihilation of mass by the collision of ordinary and seetee matter, a positive and a negative proton giving ten thousand million million electron volts, far in excess of the other reactions. Unfortunately, we do not have a source of seetee matter at the moment. Some of the stars are probably composed of it but we cannot tell from the light that they send out, for it would be the same as that from ordinary matter. A few meteors may be seetee—we'll have to go out and check on that.

It may be that the vast majority of matter away from our Solar system is reversed matter. It will certainly be worth the while of the first inter-stellar expedition checking the constitution of alien planets before they land. It would be simple enough to send down a small rocket from the ship's orbit, just in case . . . a small projectile would make quite an explosion in a seetee atmosphere, but not as large a one as would a space ship.

John Newman

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The colonistation of other worlds will be such a formidable task that no one race will ever "seed the stars" (as some of our authors put it). In the process of exploration and survey we may find ourselves exploited for the same purpose, entirely unknowing the method or realising its ultimate consequences.

HITCH-HIKERS

By Gregory Francis

Illustrated by HUNTER

The survey ship screamed low over the great fertile valley. At the sea-shore it swung in a huge arc for the return run.

She was a small ship as survey ships go, one of the newest design, and the fastest yet produced. Two people comprised her total crew; a man and a woman.

"Keep the cameras going, Diane," said Rod Longden, the nominal commander. "They may pick out something they missed the first time."

"They don't miss anything," his wife retorted scornfully. "The human eye may be fallible, but you can't fool a camera."

"You'll eat those words one of these days."

She made an impolite noise.

Longden smiled and let it go.

The second run completed, they landed on a gentle slope above a small wood in which giant ferns grew amid the trees. A little way beyond the wood a broad river flowed.

Longden analysed the air.

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"Thin, but breathable," he pronounced. "Nothing injurious in it. We'd better carry booster masks, but if we take it easy for a while we'll soon get used to it."

Outside the ship they stood quietly whilst their lungs adjusted to the thin air.

"Funny," said Diane after a few minutes of quiet observation, "it's peaceful, and the scenery is lovely, but there's something wrong. What is it?"

"It's in your ears."

She paused for several seconds. "You're right. The usual sounds you'd expect in a place like this—the rustle and sigh of leaves and branches, and the noise of animals—are absent. Yet it isn't quiet. It's . . . well, as if all the sounds were mixed up together and rolled out flat. I don't like it."

"Two of us don't but what does that matter? There's a job to do, let's get on with it."

"All right, but I'm getting the guns."

"If they'll make you feel better." Longden was secretly relieved it was her suggestion.

"Hardly the sort of place for dangerous animals," he remarked as they set out to explore the wood, "but we'd better play safe. We'll circle the place first and look at the game trails. They'll tell their story."

The circuit completed, they eyed each other unbelievingly.

"But there must be animal life of some kind here," Longden frowned. "It's not natural to find no sign of life in a place like this, and nothing even reminiscent of a game trail. Not even a rabbit run. If there are no animals in this valley, there won't be any anywhere else. It's the largest fertile area on the whole planet. Nothing much can live in the desert."

"How very like Mars this planet is," Diane mused. "Same size, same gravity, pretty much the same appearance. Only, the air is breathable here. The Martians destroyed their own world; I wonder if this planet has a similar history?"

"Even so, there'd surely be a few survivors. The air hasn't been destroyed as was the case with Mars. Perhaps there was more of it. Still, it might be an idea to investigate the desert areas. A few nice ruins would please the archeologists."

"Get a chronometer, and you can please me."

"Hullo, got a bee in your bonnet?"

"Maybe. I want to circle that wood again before we go inside it."

Longden accepted her usurpation of command philosophically. She always had a good reason, and what could he do about it anyway. But he was constrained to register a mild protest.

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"You're too fond of walking," he said. "I'm hungry."

"So am I, but if I can wait a few minutes, so can you. It'll do you good, you're getting fat." That last was an outrageous lie.

He got the chronometer.

"Check the time," said Diane.

"Check."

They halted beneath a large tree that stood a little beyond the borders of the wood. Diane asked for another time-check and they carried on to complete the circuit.

"Now," said Diane. "I'll tell you why I kept you from your food." She pointed. "There's the tree we stopped under as near as nothing dead opposite the ship on the other side of the wood.

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A fair halfway mark. Right? Now look at the times. We took eight minutes to reach that tree. Right? Then why did we take fifteen minutes over the return half?"

Longden looked from her to the chronometer and back.

"Well, I'll be damned!" he swore softly.

"I noticed the difference the first time," she said. "But I wanted to be sure. Now I wish I hadn't. It's frightening."

"I'll tell you what I'm going to do," Longden resumed command. "I'm going to get a meal inside me"—he pushed Diane ahead of him toward the airlock—"and so are you. Then, later, we'll take our guns and really investigate the place. Comb it thoroughly. Something, somehow, is haywire, and we're going to find out what it is."

But they didn't.

Their systematic search revealed nothing. There was no sign of animal life anywhere within the wood. They were about to abandon the operation when Diane suddenly halted. "Hey! What is this?" She pointed straight ahead to the ship. Longden raised his eyebrows.

"The ship," she said, "should be behind us. It was a moment ago, and we haven't turned around. What's going on?"

"You're sure of that?"

"Positive."

"We'll soon see. Stay here." He started walking in the opposite direction. She watched his receding back and then, suddenly, he was walking towards her. He was within a few feet before he noticed her. He stopped still and looked at the ship. His teeth clicked and he set off again. The same thing happened

"Come on. Back to the ship," he said. "I don't like this. Someone—or something—is playing with us. It could become serious. There wouldn't be much fun running around in circles trying to find the way out."

There wasn't. They turned to walk to the ship and it wasn't there. They located it on the opposite side of the wood. They started off towards it, but as they approached the edge of the wood it vanished again.

"Damn!" swore Longden. "Why did I open my big mouth?"

They turned around, and as they had expected, there was the ship in plain view. They started off again, and again it vanished, when they were near the centre of the wood this time. It reappeared to their right.

"It's us moving around," said Diane. "The background of the ship doesn't change." She looked at Longden with dismay. "This is a mess. Feels like a nightmare. Pinch me, it may be."

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She yelped. "Once is enough. I'm convinced. But what goes on around here?"

"Either it's a trap or some kind of joke, but deciding which won't help us. As it is, I see no sense in chasing a mirage." He sat down on the grass. "This wants thinking out."

Diane followed suit.

"Come on," said Diane some time later. "I've had enough of this. Let's get back to the ship."

"And how do you propose to do that?"

"Easy." She took his hand and led him out of the wood. This time the ship stayed put. Longden looked sheepish.

"Just getting out of range was too simple, too obvious a solution for such a complex mind as mine."

"Why not face up to it? You're getting old, fat and lazy."

Longden was thirty-three, well over six feet tall, and built like a lath. While Diane, ten years younger, was slim and shapely, with a dark elfin beauty. But she only looked fragile.

"You're probably right," he sighed. "Or you wouldn't have got away with that last remark."

Nevertheless Diane kept out of reach.

They had almost reached the ship before they realised that the normal sounds of the wood had returned.

"To me," said Longden, "the evidence appears conclusive. The same old story, although they don't seem to have made extensive use of hydrogen bombs. The atmosphere is too deep for that." Sombrely, he gazed around him at the limitless waste of sand and crumbled rock. "Just look at it now. A few centuries ago a populous city occupied this site, and the surrounding countryside was green and fertile. The futility, the stupidity of it all!"

"Don't forget that Earth went perilously close to a similar end," said Diane. "We hovered on the brink for a decade before sanity returned." For once there was no levity in her tone.

"But the important thing is that we stopped in time. Every civilisation has its opportunity, it seems. At the crucial point it chooses peace or war. Life or death. And there's never a second chance. We have found the remains of several civilisations that fell, all in a similar manner. Some day, perhaps, we shall find one that chose the right path. If so, we shall have nothing to fear from each other, for they too will have reached maturity."

Diane nodded absently and picked up a blackened shard. For a few moments she studied it with a vague distaste, then flicked it sideways to the ground. It shattered, and as it did so her blue mood dissipated. "Come on, mature man," she urged, "we have

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enough artifacts here to make the archeologists our friends for life. They can come and get a shipload more if they want to, but they're no use to us and I'm carting no more into the ship. Not even that heap of fossilised bones you prize so highly. Besides, it'll be dark soon."

"What you please to call a heap of fossilised bones," Longden answered warmly, "was once an inhabitant of this planet, and as such, extremely valuable."

"You should have taken up archeology instead of space exploration. Old things fascinate you. Your approaching senility, perhaps."

Effortlessly, Longden straightened his back. He had the lithe action of a boy half his age. "Is that a challenge?" he asked.

The ship was too far away, so she smiled and shook her head. "I could be wrong."

He regarded her steadily for several seconds and she held his gaze. He picked up the basket of bones and she took his arm. They reached the ship as the sun dipped below the horizon.

Despite her derogatory remarks anent old bones, Diane proved not averse to the fascinating task of assembling the jig-saw puzzle they represented.

The job lasted until dawn. Wearily, but contentedly, they surveyed the skeletal representative of the defunct inhabitants of the dying world. It stood about forty inches high.

"Not by any stretch of imagination could we describe it as humanoid," Longden commented after some minutes of silence, "but the general structure follows the same old pattern. It always does. Funny, isn't it, that the old writers of stories concerning extra-terrestial life, with their weird and wonderful monstrosities didn't think of the strangest of all possibilities; that all life, everywhere in the Universe, occurs under similar conditions and with similar results! Like this chap. His build is similar to many others we've seen in widely scattered systems. He could easily have come from Earth."

"He has four limbs, a vertebral column, a cage of ribs and a skull to top it all," agreed Diane, "so there is a modicum of sense in what you say. He obviously walked upright, and he even has five appendages on each limb that are strongly suggestive of fingers and toes. Only"—she added pensively,—"he may be a she."

Longden airly dismissed her contention.

"Almost certainly a great personage in his day," he said. "His tomb had the place of honour, in the centre of a circle of other, presumably lesser lights. And his are the only bones to have been preserved intact. Some great king, perhaps."

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He turned the skull over in his hand. Except for the high, almost conical dome, it reminded him of the skull of a bear.

Diane took it from him. "Let's have a look inside it," she said, and suited her actions to her words. Carefully the dome of the skull was sawn through and the top removed. "H'm! " she said. "Quite a large brain-pan." She glanced up at Longden. "Taking into consideration your greater thickness of bone, almost as big as yours. Not exactly flattering to him but at least it does prove the race had possibilities."

The table was between them, and anyway Longden was tired, so he let her remark ride.

"I think," he said, "we need some sleep before attempting the permanent mounting."

"I second that." Diane yawned. "And after that, what? The next system in line? "

"Not yet. I want to return to where we first landed."

"I had an idea you would."

"If I didn't pander to your insatiable curiosity, your speculative flights of fancy would drive me mad. It's a matter of self-defence."

She stuck out the tip of a pink tongue and went to bed.

"We didn't both have the same dream, did we? " Diane's attempted levity fell flat. "Or should I have said nightmare? " she amended weakly.

Longden just stared silently. Gaily coloured birds fitted among the branches and filled the air with their twittering. Rodents peered from the tree-roots, beady eyes alert. Rustlings in the undergrowth betrayed the presence of other small animals. Several large deer-like creatures grazed upon the lush grass between the trees.

A scene of utter, frightening normalcy.

Diane broke a long and painful silence. "I don't believe we ever went into that wood."

"I'm inclined to agree, but I'd like to know what really did happen."

"I think that's something we'll never find out. Whatever caused that weird experience is gone, apparently. But let's take a walk through the place, just the same. We might see something interesting."

They did, but only when they returned to the ship.

A few yards from the airlock Longden stopped short, holding Diane back with a strong hand on her foream.

"Look! " He pointed to the ground ahead. In a small hollow

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two animals the size of terrier dogs were rolling over each other in play. They uttered eager yapping sounds, for all the world like a pair of puppies.

Except for a broad grey stripe along each flank, and feet to match, their coats were shiny jet. They were tail-less.

Suddenly, they became aware of their observers, and for several moments stood perfectly still; then trotted towards them for a closer scrutiny. In direct contrast to the creatures in the wood, they evinced no sign of fear. After a short period of mutual regard the animals suddenly rolled over in the grass, yapping excitedly.

"They want to play!" Diane exclaimed. She knelt down before them and one of them dashed towards her, wriggling ecstatically. The other bounced stiff-legged in Longden's direction with an eager whine.

"They're cute," he said as he rolled it over on to its back. "Quite harmless, too."

They left the animals after a few minutes and entered the ship's airlock. As the outer door began to close there was an excited scampering, and two bundles of black and grey fur were precipitated at their feet.

"Well," Longden smiled, "this simplifies matters."

"I hated the thought of removing them from their familiar surroundings, but they've adopted us, so what can we do? The boys back at base will turn cartwheels over them. If we can get them back alive." He screwed the outer door shut.

Diane fixed them a comfortable den in a spare cabin. Her worries over feeding them were short-lived. They ate anything and everything she produced.

"I wonder if they could be descendants of that skeleton?" she mused as she watched them nose around the ship.

"They don't look degenerative to me," said Longden, "and if they were, they'd never slip back that far. Those paws are nothing like hands, so that's out. More likely domesticated animals that didn't revert to the feral state. Probably wasn't enough wild country left to revert into."

"Could be. Or they may be domesticated animals, period."

"I'm not forgetting that experience in the wood . . "

"Why scare yourself now? It's over and done with. No one else is likely to be bothered, either. I'm writing this place off as useless and potentially dangerous. If we can't explain it, it's safer to blacklist it."

"Yes . . . you didn't notice, did you, that that curious phenomenon of the varying times for the same distance still obtains? I did. That's not explained, either."

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"It'll be in the report, and the sooner we get away from here the better. We've only two more systems to check, then we can dump the problems into the laps of the experts at Base, and see what they think."

"Good. When do we leave?"

"Early tomorrow. That'll give the animals a chance to settle down to shipboard conditions."

The animals—neither even thought of giving them names—adapted to the new condition enthusiastically. Clean habits seemed inherent in their make up, and they were given the run of the ship.

"Remarkably intelligent little things, aren't they?" remarked Diane thoughtfully. "There's no animal on Earth to approach them. Just show them something once and they're on it in a flash. They don't need training."

"Perhaps they're already trained."

"Now you're trying to scare me."

"You don't scare that easily."

"No, but just the same I sometimes get the funniest feeling when they are around."

"You need an aperient."

"Not when I feel that way."

He took her by the shoulders and regarded her with a frown. "You know, I'd like to get them back to Earth, but if they worry you that much we'll leave them behind in the morning. They're not that important."

She smiled at him fondly. "You sweet old liar! Nor is your right arm important. Forget it. I'm just over-tired and letting my imagination run away with me."

She hugged him tightly for a few moments and slipped away. He gazed after her thoughtfully, then busied himself with the preparation for the take-off.

The transition from faster-than-light to interplanetary drive was smooth and uneventful. When they were securely anchored about a hundred million miles above the yellow sun's pole, Diane began the search for planets. She found a higher than average complement. As each was identified a tracer was put on it and Longden got busy with the spectroscope.

The tally was complete within three weeks, and the computors had digested the evidence and delivered their verdict.

"You know what?" said Longden. "We've found something unique. A speculative dream come true. Look here." He spread the chart over the table. "Twelve major planets with a total of

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forty-four satellites. Four inner planets look promising but that's only by the way. See this; twin worlds of identical size in perfect balance at opposite sides of the sun sharing the same orbit! I double-checked it myself before I'd believe it. And to cap it all, they should both be habitable."

Diane perused the readings. "These instruments can't lie," she said. "They don't know how. What with one thing and another, we look like causing a stir, back at Base."

"I like your efforts at understatement! "

"I hope these twin planets are all they promise to be. That will make up for the one we've just had to write off."

"What does it matter to us? " queried Diane. "The chance of their being colonised in our lifetime is impossibly remote. All Earth's surplus population—and more—has been drawn off now, and conditions are too easy there to induce people to start life anew on another planet."

"Wait until the coming generation matures. There will be a fair percentage of malcontents among them. This is just a temporary recession, or why do you think we're this far afield? The Council knows what it's doing."

Diane shrugged. "Could be. I'm no sociologist."

"That's one argument saved, then. Let's go and have a look at these planets, shall we? "

"You know what this is going to mean, don't you? At least three months each on the twins, and a couple of other planets we'll want to look at. Supplies are running short. I doubt if we'll be able to finish our stint."

"Oh, I don't think it's as bad as all that. We should be able to live off the land, in part anyway. They'll hold out. And if they don't—so what? In these circumstances we could skip the rest without anyone complaining."

"You're the boss, it's your worry. Let's go."

It was a younger planet than Earth, but markedly similar in most respects. It could have been Earth of a million years ago. The atmosphere was thick and moist and heavily oxygenated. The vegetation was lush. In the temperate zones—an inclined axis produecd season changes—giant trees reared hundreds of feet into the sky above almost impenetrable forests. The steaming jungles were impassable.

The fauna shared the Terrestrial similarity. Great herds of wandering herbivores were stalked and preyed upon by other

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mightier beasts. The one notable difference between these and Terrestrial animals was their far greater size.

"I hope," said Diane, as she noted the fact, "that man—or his counterpart—has not yet arrived on the scene. It would be rather disconcerting for a girl taking an evening stroll to come face to face with an eight-foot giant." She pondered for a moment. "Or would it?"

"You'd better hope you don't," Longden grunted. "You're so sweet he'd eat you up. And literally. He'd be in the cannibal stage . . ."

"Pig!" she pouted. "There goes another of my dreams."

"I'll drag you around by your hair, if that'll help."

Diane smiled, then laughed outright. "I can just picture you dressed in animal skins. Some caveman, you!"

"In such a warm climate, I doubt if they'd bother."

She let the subject drop.

They found no sign of intelligent life. The few ape-like creatures they saw in the jungles were even lower on the scale of intelligence than Terrestrial apes.

"What do you know!" said Diane as she left the animals' quarters ten days after landing. "Our pets have produced a litter."

Longden showed no surprise. "Well, what would you expect? How many?"

"Can't be sure as yet. Six or seven, I should say."

Later they found there were eight. Interest in them waned in a few days, and they were almost forgotten. There was so much of greater interest.

Eventually Longden declared the investigations closed.

"That's the lot. We'll start for the second twin tomorrow. You were right about the supplies, they are going to be tight, but I didn't reckon on spending over four months here."

"The other one will probably be much the same."

"That will simplify matters considerably. Give us a head start."

During the night while they slept, the airlock opened and closed.

Longden was checking their orbit when Diane entered the control room. He looked up. "Something worrying you?"

"In a way, yes. Those cubs, pups or whatever you like to call them, have disappeared. The lot. They must have got out somehow and were left behind. They're nowhere in the ship."

"They'll have to take their chance then. We're not going back to look for them. Some animal has probably made a meal of them by now, anyway."

"I doubt it. They're smart, young as they are. Their parents don't appear to be worried. In fact they seem quite happy about

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it. They even have a certain smugness about them."

"Your vivid imagination. I expect they were glad to get rid of them. Quite likely they'll be having another litter."

Diane looked thoughtful. "I'll keep a closer eye on them if they do."

Longden's forecast was correct. Within three days of landing on the second planet another batch arrived.

Again there were eight.

Despite a virtual duplication of conditions the survey lasted over three months. Longden viewed their depleted stocks with concern.

"It's back to Base for us, I'm afraid. We daren't carry on any longer. No safety margin."

"Not even the other two planets here?"

"Not even them. Home, and fast. We've cut it so fine I wouldn't wait for morning if I wasn't so tired."

"Right. I'll check up on our pets before I turn in, though. Don't want this lot to stray."

"Still there?" Longden asked when she returned.

"All present and correct, and the doors are secured."

But they were gone in the morning.

"No sign of them," Longden growled when he returned to the ship. "They've evaporated. And we can't afford to waste any more time. Beats me how they got out, though."

"Me, too. But we still have the originals. Let's go before they disappear too."

"What the . . .! Hey, Diane! Come here."

"What's up, one of them bite you? Serves you right, you should let me feed them," Diane grumbled. But she ran to the animals' quarters. She knew from Longden's tone that something was seriously amiss. But nothing like this.

Longden was just inside the door, staring at something in the corner of the room, shock and incredulity written on his face. He drew Diane to his side. "Look!" he breathed, and pointed.

There in the corner something—two somethings—pulsed and shimmered, outlines wavering wraithlike in the strong light. Diane gasped. A shiver ran up her spine and settled at the base of her skull, while an awful sick feeling invaded her stomach. Her fingers bit deep into Longden's biceps, but he was too engrossed in the weird scene in the corner to feel anything.

Fascinated, they watched the metamorphosis in silence

Gradually, the outlines steadied. The black and grey flickered finally into extinction and the wavering ceased.

Their pets had gone. In their place—

"Good Lord!" Longden was first to recover his wits His face was grim. "Those conical skulls, and the structure of their bodies.

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They match that skeleton we dug up in the desert. Perfectly. So they didn't die out, after all!"

He became aware of the fingers hurting his arm and absently disengaged them. He stepped closer to the inert bodies

Hesitantly, Diane followed.

"They're not moving," she ventured warily.

Longden mentally—and visibly—shook himself free of the spell that bound him and gingerly examined them.

"Only one is alive," he announced. A few seconds later he said: "They're both dead now."

"Well, what do you know!" was all Diane could say

She stared bewildered at the two golden-furred bodies until Longden led her away.

And suddenly they were both aware of what had really happened.

"I'm worried," said Longden, and he looked it. "It's this report. If I tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but, will they believe it or send us both to the psycho ward?"

"Psycho ward, of course."

"Cheerful, aren't you?"

"Just facing the facts. If you were at Base, what would be your reaction to a tale like that?"

"But this is serious. We left behind us a potentially formidable rival to human supremacy. By the time our colonists settle on those planets they can be sufficiently well established to drive them off. They seem to have a strong pull over the human race."

"I wouldn't be so sure." Diane was unworried. "If they were so bright, why didn't they have space travel? Technically, they were never in the same street as us, and look at the start we've got! So stop worrying, for Heaven's sake. We've had a scare. So what? Forget it, it's over and done with. At that, if the present trend continues, a fighting rival a century or two hence might be a good thing. The race is growing soft through lack of resistance. What you must do is obvious. "Cook up a good yarn. I'll countersign it."

Longden sighed. "I suppose you're right. By the way, while we're on that subject, we never did run over the film we took above that valley."

"That's soon remedied." Diane fussed over her portable projector and slipped in two numbered reels. "Now we can see what was really there."

But the screen showed blank.

Gregory Francis

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Psychologically, a race which reaches a state of near Utopianism will have passed its peak efficiency and begun a decline in both mental and physical powers. The children of such a race would be entirely unsuited for the rigours of further colonisation—especially if such a project was extra-terrestrial. Therefore, some method would be necessary to find the most suitable subjects with the necessary dormant qualities to stop the decline. It could be a very tough procedure.

THE ROBBERS

By E. C. Tubb

Illustrated by LEWIS

On his eighteenth birthday Tony Blain shocked his parents almost to hysteria by announcing his intention of doing something which was never mentioned in polite society.

"Join?" His mother, fifty but still beautiful, stared helplessly at his father, sixty but still upright and active. "The *Service?*" The way she said it made the word sound unclean

"That's right." Tony stared defiantly down at the soft carpet.

"Nonsense!" His father came over to him and dropped a hand on his shoulder. "You can't mean it, Tony, not a well-brought up boy like you. I'm surprised at your even mentioning it before your mother, it's . . . It's indecent."

"What's indecent about it?" Tony tried not to hear his mother's muffled sobs. "All I want to do is to join the Service."

"Now you're being silly." His father bit his lips as he remembered the books on child psychology. "Why don't we talk this over man to man? You don't want to upset your mother, do you? And I know that you wouldn't like to upset me." He laughed, a forced, unnatural sound, but his eyes behind their contact lenses

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held a glint of worry. "If that Johnny Parker's been filling your head . . . "

"Johnny has nothing to do with it." Tony squirmed from beneath the parental hand, wishing that his father would realise that he had grown up and was no longer a child. "I just want to join the Service."

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"But why?" His mother dabbed at her eyes with a scrap of lace. "Aren't you happy here?"

From her tone Tony knew that 'here' meant the house, their friends, his father's business, the world and, in short, the entire universe. He sighed as he tried to find the words which would convince them he was serious.

"Please." He fought the desire to cross the room and comfort his mother with promises to forget the whole business. "It isn't that I'm unhappy or miserable; it's just that I want to get away, see things for myself instead of on the video, *do* something for a change instead of following the same old round. I . . ." He paused as he saw their blank expressions, knowing that his words were literally meaningless to them. "I just want to join the Service."

"I've never heard of anything so disgusting in my whole life!" His father paced the floor in his anger. "Here you are, a decently brought up boy—a boy with everything to look forward to and without a worry in the entire world—wanting to run off and join that gang of criminal scum. I won't allow it, do you hear? I won't allow it!"

"You can't stop me," reminded Tony quietly. "I'm of age."

"You're only a baby," wailed his mother. "You're too young to know what's best. Listen to your father before you do anything you may be ashamed of later. The Service!" She shuddered as if he had said an unforgiveable obscenity.

"But . . ."

"Your mother's right, Tony," snapped his father. "It's about time the Service was closed down good and for all. It's nothing but a source of trouble and a menace to decent people. We had the same trouble with the Colonisation Project years ago, though at least they did offer something concrete, and I can tell you that if they hadn't stopped recruiting they would have been shut down. This Service business is getting a little too much for decent people to stomach and I forbid you to even think about it again."

"Yes, sir."

"After all what do we need it for?" His father was like a dog with a big juicy bone and he couldn't stop worrying it. "*We* don't need soldiers. *We* don't have wars. *We* live in peace. As I was telling the others at the club the whole idea of the Service is to find jobs for incompetants who would starve if ever they had to pit their brains against real business men." His smirk left no doubt that he classified himself as a 'real' business man. "If it wasn't for the way they taint the minds of our youth the whole

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business would be a farce and I'm really surprised that any boy would even consider giving up home and comfort, the love of his parents and a safe, snug future to join up with those uniformed fools."

"Yes, sir." Tony hoped that his voice held the right amount of dutiful obedience.

"I'm glad that you see it my way, son. When you remember all that we've done for you you'll realise that it's only your simple duty to forget this nonsense. You know the plans I have for you, the things your mother and I have decided. There's a place in the office just waiting for a bright young man to step into and within a few years, twenty or thirty say, I wouldn't be surprised to see you sitting in my chair." His father grinned with self-conscious embarrassment. "I'll be getting a little old by then, of course, but I'll still be able to bounce my grandson on my knee."

Tony sighed, feeling the imponderable weight of inertia forcing him back into his predetermined destiny. The plan was simple. First college, then the office and routine work for thirty years or until his father decided to retire, and with the modern life expectancy what it was a man remained active and alert for over a century. There would be a child, a pre-determined son or, if he were very lucky, a girl and a boy both. All planned, all taken care of, all decided by his too-loving, too-possessive parents and a benevolent, patriarchial government.

The thought of it made him writhe.

The recruiting officer was a big, scar-faced man with eyes like chips of granite and a sneering, contemptuous mouth. He leaned back in his chair, not speaking, staring at the youngster, waiting for him to break the silence. It was an elementary trick in psychology. Too elementary. Tony didn't speak.

"Well?" the officer finally snapped. "What do you want?"

"I want to join up."

"Join up, what? Tie-rails? Curtains?"

"I want to join the Service," said Tony quietly. The man's reactions disappointed him. He had expected to be greeted with open arms and pleased interest but so far he had only met cold indifference and blank hostility.

"So you want to join the Service." The officer nodded as if at a child. "Why?"

"Why?" Tony blinked. His real reason was that he was bored with the safe monotony of life at home and wanted a change. The only other way he could leave Earth with-

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out spending a lot of money he didn't have was to join the Service and he had imagined they would have welcomed any new recruit with open arms. Apparently he had been wrong.

"Don't you want recruits?"

"Perhaps." The officer shrugged as he opened a drawer and pulled out a printed form. "You haven't answered my question."

"Must I? I would have thought that the mere fact I'm offering to join would have been its own answer."

"You think so?" The officer stared up from beneath his lowered brows. "Look, friend, if you knew how many snotty-nosed kids I get in here you'd think differently. Every time one of them has a row at home they come crying to join up and every one of them backs out after the first couple of days. Now? Why do you want to join?"

"I want to do something with my life," said Tony slowly. "I feel stifled at home and want to get out and away from it all."

"So you've decided that the Service can provide an escape route?" There was no mistaking the sneer in the man's voice. Tony flushed.

"Perhaps, but what is it to you what my reasons are? You want men don't you?"

"We want the right kind of men," corrected the officer. He stared at the young man. "Look. You've asked to join us—we didn't ask to join you. Now, for the last time, just why do you want to join?"

"I want to escape the rat-trap I'm in," snapped Tony. "I want to plan my own life instead of having it all done for me. I want a chance to travel and see things as they are instead of over the video. I want . . ."

"You want to fight?"

"Fight?" Tony swallowed at the interruption and struggled to accept a new concept. "Kill, you mean?"

"Men don't fight for fun," said the officer drily. "You know what the Service is, don't you? You know that we keep order out among the new worlds. That means that you'll have to fight. Well?"

"I'll fight," said Tony without hesitation. "Can I join?"

"That's better." The officer made several notations on the form. Name? Age? Residence? Educational qualifications? Any disease? Tony answered mechanically as the officer filled out the form. "Parental consent?"

"No."

"No?"

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"I don't need it," said Tony defiantly. "I'm of age."

"I see." More scratch marks and a scrawling signature. "Sign here and press the ball of your right thumb there." The man watched as Tony completed the form. "Right. You're now a provisional member of the Service. There will be a week of examinations and innoculations and during that time you will be able to exercise your right of quittance. After that time you are bound body and soul for the next ten years. Better decide one way or the other as soon as you can—ten years can be a long time where you're going."

"I'll stay."

"I hope so." The officer pointed towards a door. "Go through there, an orderly will attend you and you must do everything you're told." He held out his hand. "Good luck, soldier."

Tony smiled as he took the proffered hand. Soldier! The word had a nasty flavour but he supposed that he would get used to it, just as he would get used to the harsh paint instead of the soft pastels at home, the obsolete devices and the unperfumed air. In any case he still had a week to decide.

The officer watched the young man disappear through the doorway then thumbed the button of an intercom on his desk.

"Yes?"

"Benson here. A new one coming through."

"Good?"

"Perhaps. I think that we'll be able to use him."

"Report?"

"The usual thing. Frustration at parental control, wanderlust, revolt against stultifying security, romantic imagination and the usual self-interest." He chuckled. "Aggressive too."

"Good. We'll give him the works and see how he reacts." The unseen speaker sighed. "I wish that we could get more."

"So do I," said Benson feelingly. He opened the circuit and sat grimly behind his desk.

Waiting.

The training was queer. Like all his generation Tony knew nothing of war or military strategy and had always been told that war and soldiers were complementary and unpleasant. Earth had been free of internecine conflict for more than five hundred years and even the historical videos and educational tapes only mentioned war as something best forgotten. So much had the desire for peace become ingrained in the race that the Service, the sole surviving branch of the armed forces, was considered as something

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not nice to talk about, much as the prisons of an earlier age in their own time.

But even so the training seemed queer.

In fact it was more than queer, it verged on the insane. The business of marching in strict tempo, of slamming delicate feet hard against unyielding concrete, of making ridiculous gestures whenever meeting an officer and of forcing the body into mechanical posturings. Then there was the stupid, niggling, almost insulting insistance on non-essentials. The polishing of metal which basically could not take a high polish. The staining of equipment with temporary stain when it was obvious that a plasta film would have served the same purpose with less effort and, most infuriating of all, the demand that everything be kept exactly in its place without deviation and without reason.

Tony stuck it for five weeks, waiting all the time for some sign that would convince him it was all in fun or had some deeper more basic reason than any he had been able to find, and then, when none was forthcoming, protested.

The reaction made him mentally ill.

It wasn't the physical side so much as the sheer stupidity of what they made him do. Routine work, useless, done to shouted commands and hostile eyes. He dug a trench—and then filled it in again. He scrubbed a floor, using a brush not more than two inches square—and then had to dirty it in order to scrub it again. The explosion came when they told him to sweep the parade ground with a handbroom when a standard though archaic broom stood against a wall.

"You refuse?" The loud-voiced sweaty faced man who seemed to take a sensual delight in inventing newer and more stupid tasks glared at the young man.

"Yes." Tony deliberately refused to stiffen to attention. "I refuse to have my intelligence insulted by such tasks."

"You know what this means of course? You are under military discipline now and you can be shot for refusing to obey an order."

"Go ahead and shoot," said Tony wearily. "If the Service is composed of men like you and jobs like this I'll be insane before the ten years are up anyway. Kill me if you want to, but let's not have any more of this stupidity."

"You . . ." The man swallowed then, incredibly, smiled with what he obviously imagined to be a warm friendliness. "Now don't be a fool, son. Discipline is essential in any army and these things have got to be put up with."

"Why?"

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"You shouldn't ask that. Orders is orders and that's all there is to it. Now get on with it, lad, and I'll forget what you said."

"No."

"Don't be a fool! You're in the Service now and you've got to do as you're told. What would happen if everyone did as they liked? You've got to learn to obey."

"Why?"

"It doesn't matter why. You're a ranker and rankers aren't supposed to think, only to obey. Now. Sweep that parade ground."

"All right—but only if I can use the big broom."

"You'll use the handbroom."

"Why?" Tony kept his voice even, genuinely interested in the answer. "If you want the ground swept isn't it logical to use the best method available? I could do the job five times faster with the big broom."

"You'll use the broom you're given or you'll be in trouble, serious trouble." The sweaty-faced man thinned his lips as if savouring an expected pleasure. "We've had men of your sort here before, cocky, self-confident kids who think they know it all. Believe me, son, they soon change their minds. We've a place here, a nice, secluded place where they learn sense and discipline." He sucked at his lips. "Now, for the last time, get sweeping or I'll report you for insubordination."

"You mean that you'd use physical force against me?" The concept was one Tony found hard to believe. Physical aggression had gone out with organised war and he found it almost impossible to realise that, unless he agreed to sublimate his intelligence, they would torture him. That would be too barbaric and against all the accepted codes of moral conduct.

"I'm not saying anything except that unless you do as you're told, when you're told, without any argument or question, you'll suffer for it." The sweaty man pointed towards the small broom and the vast expanse of ground. "Sweep."

For a moment Tony hesitated then, as the utter absurdity of the command returned with fresh impact, he shook his head.

"No."

"So you still refuse." The sweaty man shrugged and blew sharply on a whistle around his neck. "You'll be sorry, son. Believe me, you'll be sorry."

They took Tony to the secluded place reserved for those who didn't obey without question. They kept him there for twelve weeks and when they released him he seemed to have aged ten years.

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He also had an intense hatred for all things military

Commander Gerard eased his bulk in the too-small chair and glanced impatiently at the psychologist. "Well?"

French sighed as he put down the thin sheaf of papers. "As expected. Forty percent of those volunteering have revolted against conditions which they assume insult their intelligence. Fifty percent have accepted the conditions and the remaining ten percent broke beneath the strain and were returned to civilian life there to spread the ghastly horror and criminal tendencies of the Service." The way he said it didn't make it a joke.

"The percentage of those revolting is creeping up," reminded Gerard. "We don't have to worry about those who broke."

"We may have to. Already there is too much popular feeling against the Service and there has been agitation for the government to shut us down. If we return many more to spread the tales of hate and distortion then we may have a real problem on our hands."

"We won't be shut down," said the Commander with quiet conviction. He riffled the thin sheaf of papers. "My worry is that there aren't enough volunteers. We're getting the females all right, they have little to look forward to now that the genetics bureau has enforced birth control so rigidly, but the males are slow in coming forward and those we do get aren't all of the right type." He looked hopefully at the psychologist. "Maybe if we lowered the standards?"

"No." French sounded very definite. "Don't let yourself be thrown off by quantity instead of quality. We've tried the other way and it didn't work, as things are it couldn't work, and it wouldn't work if we tried it again. You know that, Gerard. Don't let's waste time going over old ground."

"You're right, I suppose," admitted the commander and stared sombrely at the papers lying on his desk. "But we're getting so few now, less than we've ever had before. What the hell's wrong with the youth of today?"

"Age."

"What?"

"Old age." French shrugged at the commander's expression. "The Earth is being stifled by the dead hand of too many old men in too many high places. With the life expectancy what it is a man lives too long, has too much power, and, because he is old, is grimly determined to hang on to that power for as long as he can. We have no wars now, no famine, no disease and the death rate has fallen to a miraculous low. But the Earth can only support

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a certain number of people, Gerard, and unless the old die there can be no room for the young. So we get stringent birth control and the rationing of children to bare replacements of those who die."

"That makes sense."

"It makes good sense, but inevitably it leads to an unbalanced ecology. Parents are having their child or children very late in life. They are middle-aged when the infant is born and old when it reaches maturity. Old people are set in their ways and there can be no real contact between a father of sixty and a son of sixteen. There isn't just one generation between them, there is two, or there would have been in normal circumstances. The boy is isolated in a world of his own, surrounded by old men and women who, though they mean well, just can't sympathise with youthful hopes and dreams. To the aged security is everything and, when they have offered their children security, they imagine they have done the full sum of their duty. The rest, the mutual understanding, the sharing of ambition, the zest and enthusiasm, all that means nothing to them. They are too old to remember their own youth."

"But Earth is peaceful now and has been for five hundred years. Are you saying that a war would be a good thing?"

"For the race, no. For the individual, yes." French shrugged at the shocked, almost horrified expression on the commander's face. "I know how you feel about war, how every intelligent man must feel, but we are talking of a remedy for a specific disease. Racially speaking war is a disease and no race can ever hope for a balanced mental existence until it can get rid of it. War brings a tremendous emotional reaction, the victors have a guilt complex and, after victory, can only do one of two things. They can try to blot out the object of their guilt, eliminate its physical existence in an effort to eliminate their own shame, or they can try to make amends and, by gifts and help, seek to restore their one-time

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enemy to equal footing again. The first method was tried at Carthage by Rome when even the fields were sown with salt so that nothing should ever grow there again. The second method was tried twice running in Europe by England with Germany. Neither method was successful."

"And yet you advocate war?"

"No. I advocate combat. You see, Gerard, man is an animal and must be treated as such. A man is basically savage, he sees a thing, he wants it, he fights to get it. Fighting, of course, like combat, need not mean physical struggle. It can be his wits against the wits of others, his desires against a system, his longing to do something against obstacles, either artificial or natural, which attempt to stop him. A youth must have this combat if he is to grow up mentally stable and, in the old days, war provided the thrill and excitement, the chance to break away from the rut and go adventuring."

"I begin to see what you mean," said Gerard slowly. "War is bad, no one can honestly make out a case for war and no intelligent man would try. Perhaps that is why the old civilisations collapsed and, in a way, it was a good thing they did."

"Yes, but we are still left with the need for providing combat for our youth. We haven't got that combat on Earth. A boy grows up and every step of his youth is planned by old men and women. He wants a thing and, because the old dote on their children, he gets it for the asking. He is protected from trouble, shielded from want, and, every time he tries to strike out on his own he is stopped by well-worn clichés. 'Your father knows best, son,' or 'Old heads are wise heads,' or 'You'll know better when you grow up.' No answers, no combat, nothing you can get your teeth into. I tell you, Gerard the youth of today is smothering in a mental bog of over-affection and parental inability to identify age with youth. It is almost as if there are two races instead of one.

"And there is another thing. A race must grow, expand, spread out with new enterprises and new ventures. Age doesn't do that. The old want things to remain as they are, as they always have been. Age is static and any race which becomes static is on the road to cultural death." French picked up the thin sheaf of papers again and flipped them in his hands. "That is why these people are so important. Without them the human race is in grave danger of dying from age-induced sterility and mental ossification." He glanced at the commander. "That is why we can have no mercy, no regrets, no second thoughts about what we do. That is the reason why we are here and, personally, I think it a good reason."

Gerard nodded.

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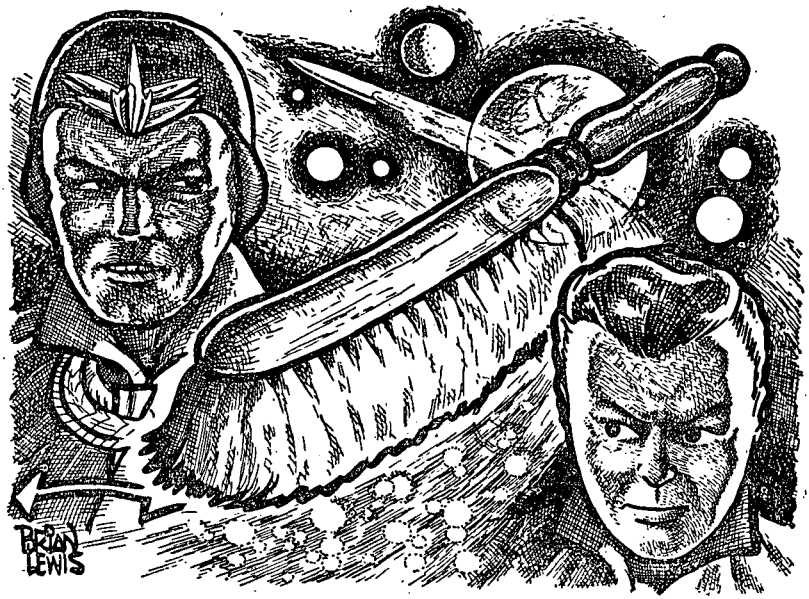

Tony crouched, naked but for a loin cloth, and flexed his hands as they swung at his sides. Above him the sun shone hot and bright from a cloudless sky and the soft turf of the field made a rolling carpet of green beneath his feet. He was fit, tanned, and muscles rippled beneath his skin where no muscles had ever shown before. He still couldn't understand the reason for the peculiar training they had given him ever since he had been released from the prison, but now it was more bearable and at least they did answer his questions.

"The reason you are being taught to fashion a sharp cutting edge from a selected piece of stone is that there may be occasions when you will need to know how it is done. Metal tools wear, are lost, rust to dullness and are hard to replace. Now—taking the flint in the left hand you support it against the left thigh and bear down with the . . ."

And on another occasion.

"The principal of the bow and arrow is fundamentally simple and is being taught to you in order that, should you ever require a missile weapon, you will know how to make one. The bow should

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be a strong piece of springy material, wood, bone, even metal will answer. The thong can be made from a strip of hide, sinew, woven threads . . . "

And again.

"It is important that you should know how to produce fire at will for the purposes of signalling, heat and light. Sparks may be struck from stones of a selected nature, a flint and . . . "

Some of it made sense. It was logical that he might be cast away on some planet, crash for example, and such knowledge would help him to survive until help came. But other items puzzled him. The training in building stone houses and dwellings from dirt and woven reeds. The teaching which seemed to concern itself with the sanitary arrangements should he ever find himself in a native village. The long, headache-producing sessions of hypnotic teaching and the continuous repetition of certain aspects of training until he knew them backwards and more, until his body moved in automatic reflex action.

And now this.

He squinted at the far side of the meadow and began to move cautiously forward. There was an animal somewhere in the field, a dangerous animal, and he was supposed to find it and fetch it back to the compound. How he was supposed to do it he didn't know.

The sun was very warm, the air heavy and sweet with the odours of growing things, and, as he moved forward over the rolling turf, his mind kept returning to the inevitable problem. At first he had been eager then, when he had realised the illogical stupidity of what he had to do, he had protested. Punishment had followed, degrading, almost insane punishment and now he had nothing but hatred and contempt for that part of the Service. But, strangely enough, he had enjoyed these past few months with their relative freeness from irksome restrictions and the flow of interesting, if basically useless knowledge.

It was fun to make a flint knife, but that's all it was or ever could be. Knowledge like that had no commercial value and the likelihood of ever needing a sharp edge made from native stone was so remote as to be almost inconceivable. The same with the bow and arrow, the methods of making fire, the tricks he had learned as to how to knot a cord and dig a furrow. Useless knowledge, wasteful pursuits and ridiculous, illogical concentration of effort. Why learn how to use a bow when even the crudest rifle would have been so much better? It would have been interesting to learn how to make ammunition or the propelling charges, and a knowledge of explosives would have surely been of more use than knowing how to build a hut.

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He began to wonder about the entire scheme of training and, as he thought about it, his contempt for the Service mounted. Stupid actions without sense or logic and now stupid knowledge without use or purpose. The Service was rumoured to be a fighting corps, battling across the galaxy with speeding ships and iron men. They had a long heritage and enforced law and order among the scattered stars with grim determination. That was how some people thought of them. Others, his father among them, had considered the Service to be a resting place for morons, incompetents, useless wasters who couldn't do a decent day's work to save their lives. An unnecessary growth on the new society which should be amputated and left to dissolve in its own slime.

Which was right? Tony didn't know, though, as he walked carelessly over the grass, he tended to believe that his father held the correct opinion.

The animal saw him first!

A low growl coincided with a rush of displaced air and a heavy body, wide-jawed and white-fanged, leapt from the grass and drove towards his throat.

Instinct saved him, the automatic response of his trained body to the unexpected. He dropped, feeling the skin of his back burn

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to the touch of raking claws, then he had spun away from the spot, his heart pounding against his ribs as he looked at the animal he was supposed to capture and take back to the compound.

It was a mutated hybrid half-dog, half-wolf, a low-bodied, red-eyed, gape-mouthed creature with a shaggy coat and a lashing tail. It snarled as Tony stared at it, writhing its lips back from gleaming fangs then, wriggling on its belly, it tensed for the spring.

Fear rooted Tony where he stood for almost too long. He stared at the animal as if at a scene on a video programme and it was only when the shaggy body had launched itself at his throat that he jerked aside. Even so the impact of the animal's body threw him to the ground and immediately he was fighting desperately for his life.

At first he couldn't believe it. Physical combat was something utterly strange to his concepts of normal living and he struggled more to prevent the animal ripping out his throat than to inflict injury in turn. Blood gushed from a torn place on his shoulder, sharp claws raked his naked thighs and saliva spotted his face. Frantically he rolled on the soft grass, half-sick from the creature's foul breath, and whimpered as he felt fangs meet in the loose skin of his arm.

He kicked, managed somehow to get to his feet, and ran desperately towards the edge of the field and the safety of the compound. After him bounded the hybrid.

Tony grunted as the weight of the lunging beast landed on his back, tripping and falling as he clawed at the shaggy coat. Now, for the first time, anger began to replace his sick fear. Rage sent adrenalin to accelerate his heart and hate replaced the cold dread of what might be. Though he didn't know it his lips writhed back from his teeth in emulation of those of the animal, and suddenly, without thought or reason, he reverted back to what his race had once been.

He snarled, his brows knitting over his eyes, his chin tight against his chest to protect his throat from the hungry fangs, and his hands sank deep into the fur around the whip-cord throat of the snarling beast. Grimly he held on, fighting the frenzied clawings of the animal, ignoring the hammer-blows from its back feet, his thumbs digging deeper and deeper into the yielding windpipe. Blood spattered him and his skin gaped with a dozen wounds, but still he held on. Now he knew that he had to kill or be killed. Now he knew that there was no mercy, no understanding, nothing between him and extinction but the strength in his body and the will to survive.

And he intended to survive.

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It seemed to take an incredibly long time. It seemed that the virile life in the creature would never die and that he had gripped the lashing throat for an eternity. Then, slowly at first, the struggling faded, the snarling turned into a whimper, the whimper into a strangled whine and, with a final convulsion, the animal jerked, twisted, and collapsed in a silent heap.

Numbly Tony climbed to his feet and, staggering a little, swung the heavy body to his shoulders and walked towards the distant compound. His wounds burned and the sight of his own blood made him feel ill, but worse than that was the knowledge that he had fought like an animal and killed like a beast.

He paused to vomit, his face shining with sweat as he relived the struggle, his flesh cringing away from the hairy touch of the dead beast. Again, in imagination he saw the gaping jaws, the red eyes, smelt the foul odour and felt the wet touch of dripping saliva. He had won the battle but he took no pride in the winning. He had killed but was ashamed of having brought death to a living creature.

And he had acted like a fool.

They had warned him that the beast was dangerous. He should have found a stone, a pair of stones, one for throwing and the other to use as a club. He had been incredibly lucky and he

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sweated again as he thought of all the things that could have happened to him. His fingers severed by those razor fangs, his wrist gripped and broken, his face slashed, his eyes . . .

He swallowed against rising nausea and was hardly conscious of reaching the compound. A man took the dead thing from his shoulders, whistled as he saw his wounds, and steadied him as he stumbled and almost fell.

"Take it easy, boy, it's all over now."

"All over?" Tony shook his head, not understanding what the other meant. "It would have killed me," he muttered. "You would have let it kill me."

"That's right."

"You admit it?" Shock and horror brought back the sick nausea. "But why? Why?"

Blackness surged around him before he could hear the answer.

It was very quiet in the office, not even the muted hum of an air conditioner broke the silence and Tony fidgeted as he stared at the two men seated opposite him at the desk. He was here because he had asked to be here, because he had determined to find out what it was all about and had demanded and insisted until they had granted an interview.

Commander Gerard cleared his throat and put down the report he had been reading.

"You're a little late, Blain," he said mildly. "I expected you at least a week ago."

"I was in hospital then, recovering from the wounds that animal gave me." Tony tried hard not to reveal his surprise at what the older man had said. Expect him?

"Of course, I had forgotten." The commander smiled as he stared at the young man. "And now you want to know what all this is about."

"Yes."

"Naturally." Gerard looked at the young man and sighed. These interviews were nothing new to him, he welcomed them, but each time they differed in trifles and differed most in number. Once he had interviewed them in batches of a score or more, then in tens, then fives, now it was down to singles. He wondered when the stream would finally cease. "Would you mind telling us," he said carefully, "just what you think the Service is?"

"I don't know just what it is," said Tony evenly. "But I know what it isn't. For one thing it isn't a military force and I doubt if it could ever fight a war."

"Oh? Why do you say that?"

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"For one thing your system of training is directly opposite to the results expected from any fighting man. A soldier should be able to use his initiative, take short cuts and reduce his work to an optimum level. He . . . "

"You're quite wrong, you know," said Gerard evenly, and remembered not to smile. "The Service could fight a war. Fight it in the only way any war should be fought—in utter extermination of both warring sides. The training you mention was basic for many years during the Period of Combat, and those old time warriors were expert in producing the kind of material they needed. The only thing which has altered is that you are of a much higher intelligence than they were. Too intelligent in fact to make any kind of a soldier, much less a good one."

He smiled at Tony's expression and turned to the psychologist. "Perhaps you would care to enlighten our young friend?"

"Discipline is based on the utter sublimation of both the intellect and the imagination," said French curtly. "An intelligent man usually has a vivid imagination and that means he can visualise the results of many actions. A good soldier, good from an officer viewpoint, is a man who does not think but merely obeys. That principal still holds true. We must have men who will do as they are told *when* they are told without question or hesitation. Hesitation could mean the loss of a strategical advantage and question makes the whole concept of war ridiculous. Once a soldier starts to question why, then he is both useless and dangerous to his own command. I trust that you can understand why this is?"

Tony nodded realising only too well from his own reactions just what would happen in a closely integrated force if the personnel should start to question every order as to its logic or validity. Men would no longer perform acts of blind heroism—their logic and imagination would combine to prevent them acting before they had considered the worth of what they did, and, once they

1955 British Convention

Britain's 1955 science fiction Convention will be held at the George Hotel, Kettering, Northamptonshire, over the Easter holiday, April 8th, 9th, 10th. Registration fee is 2/6; admission free on Friday, the 8th, and 6/- each day for the 9th and 10th (wives and juniors 4/- per day). The entire hotel has been taken over exclusively for the three-day Convention.

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visualised the risks and dangers, they would hesitate and be reluctant instead of swift and daring. But that still didn't answer his question.

"I know what you're thinking," said Gerard. "But remember this. The Service is the only armed force in the known part of the galaxy and, as such, must have soldiers to operate. With the powers we have and the potential destruction within every ship, we must have men without imagination to service them. We want no idealists, no thinkers, no men who, during the long and wearying periods of flight, begin to dream up their own concepts of military empires. That means we want men without imagination and we find them during the initial period of training."

"I see." Tony stared thoughtfully at the fading scars on his arms. "Then what about . . . "

"You?" Gerard nodded. "You fall into a special category. That is why your training has been different since you displayed your determination not to fit into the soldier-pattern." He paused, staring at the intent face of the young man. "You," he said deliberately, "are a colonist."

"A colonist!" For a moment Tony stared at the commander wondering whether or not the man was serious, then he shook his head.

"You are surprised?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because either you're joking with me or you don't know what you're talking about. You say that I'm to be a colonist and I suppose you mean that I've been selected to help found a new settlement on one of the habitable planets, but it just doesn't make sense. What training have I been given? I haven't learned anything of technology, of science, of how to maintain and operate equipment. What good would I be in any settlement?"

"What do you think a colony is, Blain?" French leaned forward as he rapped the question.

"A settlement of men and women who start a new centre of civilisation." Tony droned the words mechanically, without any real thought.

"Exactly. And what equipment do you think they need to do that?"

"I don't know. A pile perhaps for power, domes to live in, food plants and machine tools. Some mining machinery, farming equipment, transport vehicles and radio communication. Factories and assembly belts, doctors and scientists to study the ecology . . . " He shrugged. "A lot of things."

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"Too many things. Far too many for the ships we have and the worlds that are waiting." The psychologist leaned back in his chair. "We tried that way once, you may remember the Colonisation Project, and it failed. People who went to the stars wanted to take Earth with them. They wanted everything they had become accustomed to, their radios, their comforts, their easy living and protection against all danger. It couldn't be done and it never will be done. You can't shift the cultural pattern of a world and you can't transplant an entire civilisation. We tried to give them all the things you mentioned, but it wasn't enough. Mines had to be dug, water sources diverted, animals exterminated, the entire ecology of a planet changed to a similacrum of Earth. We could do it with one world. We could do it given unlimited material, unlimited men, and a couple of centuries of time. But we haven't got that much time, Blain, and we know better than to repeat past errors.

"So we found another way. Space is vast, Blain, and there are hundreds of Earth-type worlds waiting to be colonised. There are too many for us to do more than map them, test their atmospheres for oxygen content, their water for purity. Men can live on those

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worlds—we think, but it would take twenty years and the full-time efforts of an entire group of scientists to turn a possibility into a certainty. We had to find a short cut, and you are it"

"The training," said Tony quietly. "How to make a knife from stone, a bow and arrow, and how to make fire. Simple things, primitive things, the sort of things a man needs to know if . . ."

"If he is alone, without the benefits of civilisation, dependant on himself and the knowledge we can give him." French nodded. "So now you know the whole purpose of the Service. It has a bad reputation—deliberately. We want only those volunteers who have the initial drive to leave their comforts and seek something adventurous and new. We sort them out, for we can always use the soldier-type, there are too many routine jobs to be done as it is. The rest, those who are strong enough to stay, become the colonists. We teach them all the things that men have forgotten during the long climb up from savagery. How to live on the land, to make do with what they have, to kill in order to survive." He smiled at the young man's instinctive recoil. "That was perhaps the hardest lesson of all. Civilisation now does not admit of the concept of killing. Earth has been too-well tamed and men have made a fetish of peace. But colonists can't afford to be squeamish. Their lives and those of their children may depend on killing the local fauna—and there is another reason."

"Yes?"

"Survival is struggle. Continual struggle against the entire universe, and, in order to survive, men must be prepared to kill. So that is the plan, there are women, of course. They are being trained how to weave cloth from fur and vegetable fibres, to nurse and to look after their young. We aren't sending you out helpless against a new—environment—you have been taught hypnotically and your body has been trained to the ultimate. Hypnotism will enable you to kill each other's pain so that operations and child-birth will be painless. You will have tools, saws, axes, knives, and you will have books and other essentials. But you will have nothing on which you are totally dependant. You will strike roots into the ground and master your environment—or it will master you."

Tony nodded, his mind full of the bright adventure ahead and, as he left the office, his steps were light and his worries a thing of the past. Gerard sighed as he turned towards the psychologist.

"Are we being fair to them, French? Are we being fair to Earth?"

"I know what you mean," said the psychologist quietly. "But to me it isn't a question of fairness. I know that we are draining

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Earth of all its best and youngest, sapping its vitality by stealing away the very blood and attributes which could save her from senile decay. I know too that we are dumping small groups on a hundred worlds and leaving them there to survive or perish, to live or die, according to whether the planet proves too hostile for them to adapt. But what can we do? Even with the ultra-drive it takes too long to reach the stars and space is so big. A ship can call perhaps once every ten years, and will so call, but more than that is impossible. We must use these young people as our test guides. If they live they have gained a world and so has the race. If they die then they are lost and we try elsewhere. But one thing is certain. While we seed the race among the stars it will never die. Even though they forget all they know and revert back a hundred thousand years until they shiver in their fireless caves and grovel in the dirt for food, yet will the race survive. Nothing matters once we have seeded the stars, nothing can touch the race of man, and that proud monkey will be safe until the end of time. The galaxy is ours, Gerard, all ours, and if we have to rob Earth of all that is best—isn't it worth it?"

The commander nodded, thinking of the boy who had so shortly left them, of his life and what it would be, and of the brave destiny which, all unknowing, he carried with him.

A destiny which was worth any man living a lie.

E. C. Tubb

THE LITERARY LINE-UP

Next month's issue will be a fairly average one. Lan Wright has a long 'short' story "Fair Exchange" which politically and socially tangles Earth and alien cultures on a far-distant planet; Francis Rayer returns with "Kill Me This Man," a fast-moving mystery with an interplanetary background; new Scottish writer Gavin Neal makes his bow with "Short Circuit," a well-told "escape" story; and from Brian Aldiss "Outside" which will probably prove to be the gem of the issue. Plus, of course, the second long instalment of that most complex story "Prisoner In The Skull."

Story ratings for No. 27 were :

1.	Wild Talent (Part Two) - - -	Wilson Tucker.
2.	Suicide Mission - - - - -	James White.
3.	A Pound of Cure - - - - -	Lester del Rey.
4.	Strangers In The Town - - -	Lan Wright.
5.	Come Away Home - - - -	Francis G. Rayer.
6.	The Perfect Secretary - - - -	Jonathan Burke.

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Survey

Everyone connected with science fiction—editors, publishers, authors, advertisers, wholesalers and retailers—want to know "*What type of people read science fiction?*" Up to now there hasn't been a nation-wide survey aimed directly at the readers, so for our own information and the improvement of this magazine we are introducing one herewith.

We would more than appreciate your co-operation on the following information, which will be tabulated and the results broken down statistically and published in this magazine shortly. Owing to the time-lag on overseas distribution we will publish the British statistics first and then later the breakdown of our overseas readership. Your name and address is not necessary unless you wish to include it, but we would appreciate your city or town.

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